

THE CASE FILES
OF
JEWELER
RICHARD

WRITTEN BY
NANAKO
TSUJIMURA

5
NOVEL

ILLUSTRATED BY
UTAKO
YUKIHIRO



Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Case 1: Citrine Undaunted](#)

[Case 2: A Visage in Sardonyx](#)

[Case 3: The Majesty of Zircon](#)

[Case 4: The Grace of Peridot](#)

[Extra Case: Andalusite on Christmas Eve](#)

[Extra Case: Tiger's Eye Look Back](#)

[Newsletter](#)

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Seven Seas Entertainment

HOSEKISHO RICHARD-SHI NO NAZOKANTEI

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Illustration by Utako Yukihiro

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CONTENTS

case. 1 CITRINE UNDAUNTED

case. 2 A VISAGE IN SARDONYX

case. 3 THE MAJESTY OF ZIRCON

case. 4 THE GRACE OF PERIDOT

extra case. ANDALUSITE ON CHRISTMAS EVE

extra case. TIGER'S EYE LOOK BACK

CAST

Seigi Nakata

A dedicated college student hoping to go into civil service after graduation, he has started working part-time for Richard. Just as his name—Seigi, meaning “justice”—implies, he’s an earnest young man always looking to help others, even if he may be a bit lacking in tact at times.



Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian

An Englishman from Sri Lanka who speaks Japanese more fluently than your average Japanese national and is an accomplished jeweler. While his precise age remains a mystery, his incredible beauty would strike anyone, regardless of gender, utterly speechless.



c a s e

1

Citrine
Undaunted



CAMPUS WAS an interesting place at the start of a new school year. There were new students swarming the buildings I'd been to hundreds of times, and all the fourth-year students I would normally have passed in the crowd were nowhere to be seen. It kind of reminded me of a slow water change in an aquarium. Maybe that's all life was—a series of changes that took place little by little, without us even noticing.

In much the same way, I, Seigi Nakata, had formally become a third-year at Kasaba University's college of economics as of this April. A third year! Time really flies. An older student I'd met during some club activity my first year had warned me that it would feel like I'd just started, and then next thing I knew, I'd be graduating. Turned out, that was true. I guess time sort of sped up by the day, or at least, it felt like it did.

"Seigi, is something on your mind?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Where was Building 15 again?"

"The liberal arts building. The cafeteria's on the first floor. Man, your brain really is still on vacation."

Soon, everyone would be busy worrying about their future. The school, seeming to want to encourage this, put on a job-hunting preparedness seminar at the start of the new semester, and I'd decided to accompany some nervous friends of mine.

Corporate recruitment—namely, when fourth-years started to get tentative offers of employment—began in the spring. That said, if you waited until your fourth year to buy a suit and start looking for work, you'd be too late. Normal students in a four-year program, like me, would typically start self-assessments and aptitude tests in May of their third year, trying to figure out what they might be best suited to, beginning work on job applications, and preparing for interviews with their friends. It was a delicate house of cards, built on a foundation of sand—if there was the slightest issue with their school or the companies they were eyeing, everything had to be rescheduled from scratch. When it came to the details, everyone was flying by the seats of their pants.

The prep course we'd been in since our second year was focused on

administrative law and reputed to be the second-best prep course for the civil service exam—but the civil service exam wasn't the focus of every student in the class. Honestly, the people who were determined to pass it were in the minority. I think the majority of my classmates felt that, since it wasn't a given that they'd pass and they didn't have their hearts set on entering civil service, they'd go through the process for the private sector, too, and make their final career choices based on how it all shook out.

Tragically, I was decidedly undecided as to what to do with myself. I would struggle to even decide which of the two camps I fell in. But like most Japanese people, I got uneasy when I wasn't doing the same thing as everyone else, so I'd probably say I was closer to the majority of the class.

And that was how I found myself attending a job-hunting preparedness seminar early in the school year.

"Holy crap, man."

"You can say that again."

"I'm already freaked out, and it hasn't even started yet."

"Can I go back in time and start over from my first year again?"

The four people—five, including me—commiserating in the rarely used liberal arts college's cafeteria were all headed to the seminar. Looking around, I noticed everyone who'd set up camp in the area had the same look on their faces.

The flow charts we'd been given regarding finding a job and what to look out for when submitting applications were about the same as you'd find in any job-hunting treatise. The most practical advice we got during the seminar came at the end and went like this:

Don't neglect your health.

Essentially, take care of yourself.

It's normal to feel a little discouraged when you take a cold, hard look at yourself, but you can't let it get to you.

Make a conscious effort to stay on a regular schedule, eat a varied and

healthy diet, and protect both your mental and physical health.

It's a red flag if you start wanting to withdraw from your friends. It's important to have people you can talk to about anything, especially people other than your friends at school. Stay in contact with these people. Make sure you expose yourself to beauty and calming experiences as a change of pace.

The instructor—a pale man wearing glasses—ended with, “Even when the economy is growing, employment rates and working conditions don’t always improve at the same pace, so you should keep a variety of possibilities in mind.” He said all this with the most serious of serious faces imaginable.

“That felt more like a welcome-to-hell seminar than a job-hunting-preparedness seminar.”

“It wasn’t that bad.”

“It was basically one long ‘your carefree school days are over.’”

The idea was that searching for a job was the first step toward becoming a productive member of society. That seemed obvious enough to me—it was how you went from the person being served (in other words, the customer) to the person doing the serving. Honestly, I’d never considered it all that different from working a part-time job, but once they started talking about future career development, it hit me that they might not be the same thing at all down the line. At any rate...

“Seigi, are you going to keep your part-time gig at that rock store or whatever? You’re not working at the TV station anymore, right?”

“Oh... Um, yeah I’m going to keep working there.”

“I’m working in the kitchen at a pub, but I might quit. Think I should talk to my boss about it?”

“I dunno about that.”

The topic of balancing part-time jobs with the rest of our lives had come up in the seminar we were just in. We were warned that part-time obligations often clashed with job-hunting and that we should be very careful, since this was one of the most important stages of our lives. The verdict, basically, was that you

couldn't let a part-time job get in the way of securing long-term employment, and if it did, you should just quit. This, of course, came with the implicit assumption that we were all having our living expenses funded by our parents, which made me feel like the lecturer was just trying to antagonize the students who were working to support themselves.

Surely, everyone had at least a *vague* understanding that not all students were in a position to quit their part-time jobs because they felt like it? Even me—like, I didn't want to quit if I didn't have to, and I did have a bit of a nest egg, but going six months with no income was a big ask.

But the biggest issue for me wasn't money.

The place I'd been working at since last spring wasn't a "rock store" but a jewelry shop on the second floor of a mixed-use building on Nanachome in Ginza—Jewelry Étranger. The owner was a beautiful and handsome British man named Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian. His favorite food was my homemade pudding, and he ran the small shop almost single-handedly, though after an incident this past winter, his "mentor," a dark-skinned Sri Lankan gentleman named Saul, would pop in from time to time. The incident in question had involved Richard's family and even resulted in me making a whirlwind trip to England—but it was now more a fond memory than anything.

It went without saying that Richard was an *extremely* good person. When the welcome-to-hell seminar mentioned making time to enjoy beautiful and calming things, it was Richard who came to mind. I still found it hard to believe that a flesh-and-blood human could make me feel this way...but honestly, my boss was so beautiful that he barely seemed human. Just looking at him put me at ease. He was so beautiful that he made a fine crystal chandelier look dull by comparison.

It's important to have people you can talk to about anything, especially people other than your friends at school, the seminar had also said. Not only did Richard care deeply about me—his frequently rash part-timer, whenever I was worried about something and didn't know what to do—he had a way of reaching into my brain and sorting all my messy thoughts and feelings before I ever tried to articulate them. Maybe he was a telepath. There was, like, an 80 percent chance I'd believe him if he said he was. That was just how good he is.

Being around him always made me feel good. I was pretty sure I wouldn't have to worry about my health deteriorating if I kept working at Étranger while job-hunting, but...

I only worked there two days a week. Saturday and Sunday—the same days my university held its corporate information sessions.

Which meant there was a decent chance I wouldn't be able to keep working there much longer.

"Seigi? Is something eating you today?"

"Not exactly, just...I've grown pretty close to someone at work, so the thought of quitting makes me kinda sad."

"Oh, I totally know how you feel. There's this nice old man who works the kitchen with me, and I can just tell how busy he's gonna be when I'm gone. Makes me wish I could clone myself or something."

"You guys are so soft, I swear. You're gonna get chewed up and spat right back out. Weren't you listening during the info session? We're gonna be dealing with a lot of relationships like that in the near future. I mean, the place I'm at is toxic as hell—I don't know if they'd even *let* me quit—but I'm gonna do it, even if I have to fight my way out kicking and screaming."

"As they say, heavy is the head that wears the working-student crown, huh?"

"I don't think anyone says that."

Then, the conversation turned to the question of whether you should write about your parents for the "tell us about someone you admire" section of an application or not. I half listened as one of them argued that since everyone admires their parents, it probably wouldn't make your application stand out very much, while I ate a croquette from the cafeteria.

That was when I noticed someone seemed a little out of sorts.

Shimomura was usually the life of the party, the designated go-between who kept the other guys from getting in much trouble. But he was strangely silent today, eating his miso soup and grilled fish without a word. Maybe he wasn't feeling well?

Rather than ask if he was okay, I just watched him. Shimomura noticed my gaze and smiled at me.

What was with that smile? It looked forced, like the kind a stock villain in a TV show might wear.

After lunch break ended and we split up to attend our respective classes, I got a text message from Shimomura.

“Are you free tomorrow?”

Tomorrow was Wednesday, so I had class in the afternoon, just like Shimomura did. I told him I didn’t really have any plans and got a baffling text in response.

“Short-term job opening. Seeking: Seigi Nakata. Daily wage: 1,000 yen. Responsibilities: Transporting personal effects. Job term: Tomorrow morning from 7:30 to 8:00. Location: My place (see map).”

What the...?

He hadn’t mentioned anything about moving, but if he needed a hand, I had no reason not to help him. I told him he didn’t need to pay me and that I’d be there by 7:30. He responded with an emoji of a smiling cat beckoning me with one paw.

Seriously, what the heck was going on with him? I didn’t remember him being this cryptic before, but I supposed I’d just have to find out tomorrow.

And so it was that, at 7:30 p.m. the next day, I found myself in a Shin-Ookubo neighborhood lined with apartment buildings.

“Hey, Nakata!” Shimomura called out to me, sounding cheerful.

He had poked his head out of the middle door on the second floor of an old two-story apartment building. There was luggage in the hall. Shimomura wore a raggedy old jacket and a baseball cap. He came up to me, dragging a yellow suitcase behind him and, for some reason, carrying a guitar case on his back.

“I need you to carry this to the station for me. The suitcase, that is. Thanks.”

“Huh? Uh? Um, okay.”

I took the suitcase, and we left Shimomura’s apartment. I asked him where he was going, and he just kept dodging the question. He didn’t seem drunk to me. And what was with the guitar? Why did he have a guitar?

We got off the Yamanote Line at Shinagawa Station. Shimomura was headed for the Keikyu Main Line platform. The train bound for Haneda Airport rolled up to the platform by the soba stand, and my suspicion turned into certainty. I mean, it had to be, right?

I shot him a look demanding an explanation, and Shimomura smiled at me playfully.

“All right. So, I’m headed to the Alhambra. For about a year.”

“The...where?”

Shimomura explained that it was a palace in Granada, a province in the south of Spain, pretty close to Africa. That made sense. What *didn’t* make any sense at all was why my buddy from the department of economics’s exam prep course was going to Granada in the spring of his third year of college. And for a year, no less. What was he going to do there?

“I’m going to Granada to master flamenco guitar. I’m actually pretty good, you know,” Shimomura said, gently patting the guitar case on his back a couple of times.

Apparently, he’d been in the flamenco club since he started college. He’d originally joined just to have an excuse to get closer to the beautiful women dancers but soon grew enchanted by the unique style of guitar-playing associated with the dance. He was working part-time at a flamenco bar when the bar’s owner told him that if he really wanted to master his craft, he needed to go to Spain. He even introduced Shimomura to his teacher. The whole story was less bombshell, more nuclear war.

“Are...are you sure you’re going to be okay? I mean, there’s no Tokyo Tower in Spain—you know that, right?”

Shimomura took that better than I could have hoped, even saying he was surprised I remembered. How could I possibly have forgotten? It had been

Shimomura who told me he loved the view of Tokyo Tower from Hamamatsucho Station, and that the sight alone was enough to recharge his batteries. I loved that story.

“I guess I haven’t said a word to anyone in our prep class, other than our instructor. I’ve been talking to the people in my club a lot more.”

“You really surprised me. You could have said *something*, you know.”

“That’s rich, coming from you. But I’ll give you a pass because you’re my bud, Seigi.”

He explained that he’d taken a formal leave of absence with the school for one year. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to try to go pro or anything, but he did want to get better and was confident that he could if he put in the time, so he’d decided to go for it.

“And I mean, even if guitar doesn’t end up helping me in my career in the future, I’m definitely gonna get good at Spanish. And I’ll be forced to improve my communication skills, whether I like it or not. So even if I might be a year behind the rest of you on the job hunt, I’ll have plenty of angles to work.”

I sighed at the look of cool determination on his face. There was one thing I still didn’t understand, though.

“So...why did you go to that job-hunting information session yesterday?”

“*That’s* your question?”

Shimomura burst out laughing. How embarrassing. I supposed I had an occasional—no, frequent—tendency to frustrate Richard with my absurd comments like this.

“I guess I just needed one last push. I kind of expected the session to be one big scare tactic—I figure the school knows their student body is a varied lot, so they use sessions like that to give the more carefree students a kick in the pants. But even after all that, I still wanted to go. So I’m going.”

“Shimomura, you know you’re just...so cool!”

“I’m pretty sure most people will say I’m being a total idiot. But, well, I guess you and I have a lot in common.”

Shimomura smiled awkwardly and patted me on the shoulder, adding that he figured he should just admit it. Admit what?

“I really owe you. I think you’re like 70 percent of the reason I started seriously considering going to Spain.”

“I am?”

He reminded me of everything I’d gone through last year. Honestly, I cringed to remember it. It all started when Richard just up and disappeared—I just couldn’t bring myself to accept it, so when I found out he was probably overseas, I embarked on a series of one rash, spur-of-the-moment action after another. In retrospect, I *was* glad I’d done it, but I hadn’t expected to be done in just a few days at the time, so I made sure to submit as many assignments as possible in advance—to make sure I could complete the year even if I had to take a month off school. People started wondering if I’d joined a cult.

I’d asked Shimomura to take notes for me while I was gone. He was the only one I’d wound up telling that I was going overseas on kind of a whim. That was why I’d made sure to bring him back a nice bottle of alcohol as a present.

“You weren’t the Seigi I knew right before and after that whole thing. I started to wonder who the hell you even were. Until then, I guess I’d just had you down as a weirdo who wasn’t very good at socializing, or that guy who was always busy with his part-time job on weekends.”

“Huh? What? You think I’m a weirdo who’s not good at socializing? Me?”

“You never realized that about yourself? Man, you really are a funny dude. Well, your little stunt was what gave me the push I needed to just do what I wanted to do, without worrying about what other people thought.”

“...I’m not gonna pretend I understand, but I guess I’m glad I could help.”

“I promise I’ll dedicate a song to you if I make it big.”

“I won’t hold you to it, but that would be cool.”

Shimomura then asked if things were going well with my “literal angel” of a boss. The platform’s electronic notice board began to flash, signaling that the train would be arriving soon. Surely the heavenly creature he was talking about

was Richard. I remembered everyone laughing at me during a class outing some time ago, when I'd talked about how just being around this one incredibly beautiful person at work filled me with energy. Shimomura was the only one who understood what I was talking about, and that made me happy. I had to wonder, though—why did having a guitar case on his back make him look so *cool*?

"It's been going well. We've been talking on the phone a lot lately."

"Cool. So does he still have that effect on you?"

"You mean like how just seeing him makes me feel better? Because yeah, he still does."

As I finished, the announcement to stay behind the white lines came over the loudspeakers on the platform. Shimomura's laughter was drowned out by the sound of the train running along the tracks.

Once the doors opened and people got off, I swiftly stowed his suitcase on board. Shimomura came up to me and tried to actually give me a thousand yen bill, but I turned him down with a smile—it felt weird to be given something from the person who was leaving. Really, I should have been the one giving him a farewell gift, but I didn't have anything on me to give—no, wait. I did have a little something.

I took a piece of hard candy out of my jacket pocket. Shimomura looked a bit baffled.

"Here, take one of these if you like. They taste like royal milk tea. Good luck with both the trip and the guitar."

"Thanks. I'm going to make it work."

When Shimomura chuckled, commenting that the candy seemed like an odd thing for me to be carrying around. I replied that it was my "literal angel" of a boss's favorite flavor, and my friend furrowed his brow. What? What did I say?

"...You know, at that job-hunting information session, they talked a lot about making sure you get your priorities straight. I think you need to make sure you really put some thought into it."

“You mean making sure I don’t prioritize my part-time job over my future career, huh? Feels like a weird thing for the guy running off to study guitar to say.”

“I actually meant it the other way around in your case. There are more options out there than joining everyone in donning the corporate uniform. Anyway, see ya. Also, do you even know my first name? It’s Haruyoshi—Haruyoshi. You better not forget it!”

“I did know that, actually!”

“But you never call anyone by their first names. You don’t even notice when other people switch from calling you Nakata to calling you Seigi. I’m not even sure if we’re friends sometimes. Anyway, call me Haruyoshi from now on. Bye!”

The departure melody chimed just as Haruyoshi said, “Adios, amigo.” His next stop would be Haneda. And then he’d get on a plane to Spain and spend the next year studying guitar. Really? Seriously? I was friends with a guy who would actually *do* that?

I mean, of course I was. But the reality of it was hard to swallow as I sat there, watching the train rush by like a hurricane.

The platform filled with empty space once the train was gone. My thoughts were still in chaos. The other way around? What did he mean by that? I knew it’d be some time before he got to the airport and boarded, so I pulled out my phone to send him a text about it. But just then—

“Excuse me, young man,” someone called out to me.

“Huh?”

“Yes, you. The young man with the handsome hands, staring off into space over there.”

Her voice was so soft and graceful that I found myself wondering if a celestial maiden had descended upon Shinagawa Station. Richard’s voice had a certain sweetness to it, too, but it was more the aftertaste of his precision and wisdom. This sugary-sweet cotton candy voice was different.

When I turned around, I saw a woman with bobbed hair. That was my first

impression—just a woman. She wore black pumps and black stockings, a black flared skirt and a black blouse with a large yellow floral print. She was probably about 155 centimeters tall. She wore a wide-brimmed hat to shield her from the sun and carried a massive leather trunk. It was big enough that she could have probably fit in it if she tried. Something about her made me think of a French doll that had been mistakenly given a Japanese head.

“Could you be a dear and carry my luggage for me? I’m meeting an acquaintance at a café on the first floor of Tokyo Station, but as you can see, I am but a frail maiden terribly encumbered by this heavy bag.”

I struggled to place her dialect. My first instinct was Kyoto, but none of my close friends spoke the dialect, so she could have just as easily been from Wakayama or Hiroshima for all I knew. Regardless, it was definitely a Kansai dialect.

“...You’ll want to take the Keihin-Tohoku Line to get to Tokyo Station from here.”

“I know little of Tokyo, so take me, would you? Be a darling.”

There was a certain aggressiveness—she wasn’t about to let me say no—to her gentle smile that reminded me a bit of my mother, Hiromi. Knowing nothing good could come of opposing a woman like that, I figured I might as well carry the trunk for her—but somehow, I found myself on the Keihin-Tohoku Line headed for Tokyo Station.

She just kept going “could you be a dear” this and “be a darling” that. I couldn’t find an opportunity to duck out. If being able to suck people into your own personal vortex was a talent, she was a prodigy. I did have plenty of time before my afternoon classes, and I had been planning to eat some lunch before I headed home, so I guess it wasn’t so bad.

The woman wore a ring on the middle finger of her left hand. I’d never seen a gem cut like that before. It was hard to describe—the large yellow stone had been carved into a peculiar three-dimensional shape with round dents in it here and there, almost like a block of cheese. Narrow tunnels cut through the gem, as if it had been pierced by wires. Maybe it was glass? It was certainly as clear as glass. But I could see some subtle inclusions, and that the silver ring it was

set in featured melee diamonds on either side. I didn't think there were many people who'd adorn a piece of glass with diamonds like that.

But the stone was extremely large, too. It sat atop her middle finger, but it was so big, it encroached upon both her index and ring fingers as well, making her already slender digits look even thinner. What could it be? Topaz? A fancy colored sapphire? Neither seemed quite right. I felt like she'd probably punch me if I told her she could turn it into a decent pair of brass knuckles.

"That ring you're wearing... It's pretty unusual."

"Is it? What's so unusual about it?"

I explained that the holes, dents, and size were all unusual, and she chuckled. The most mysterious thing of all wasn't the stone but the identity of the woman who'd conscripted me into carrying her bag. She had to be a fashion designer or a musician or someone in a glamorous line of work, right?

"You have keen eyes, young man. Has anyone ever told you that you were an honest boy, honey?"

"Oh, um, yes, occasionally."

"See, I just knew it. Of course, being *too* honest makes you nothing but a fool, but you seem to be toeing that line just fine, young man. I like people like you."

"Huh? Oh, uh, thank you. Ha ha ha..."

"How darling."

I had decided to call her "Ms. Darling" for the time being. Obviously not out loud.

Ms. Darling promptly got off the train and onto the platform by herself, while I hefted the trunk with both hands and struggled off after her. I probably would have taken that thousand yen from Shimomura if he'd made me do something like this, but I guess free labor was just the theme of the day.

She walked briskly from the Keihin-Tohoku Line platform, through the always-crowded JR Tokyo Station, toward the Chuodori exit. Near the ticket gate for the Shinkansen, she slipped into a Japanese-style café. One of the employees courteously offered to take her bag, and I handed it over, grateful that my job

was finally over. I could leave—or at least, so I thought.

“What in heaven’s name are you doing over there? Come here. Do you think I would be so boorish as to allow you to leave without at least some tea, after carrying my bag for free? Come. Come, come.”

Ms. Darling, who had removed her hat, tapped her fingers on a seat at the counter. Apparently, she wanted to compensate me for carrying her bag. I wasn’t sure if I should take her up on the offer—not because I felt bad about her treating me, but because I was starting to feel anxious about the prospect of getting more involved with this person. But, I figured, we were in Tokyo Station. If I walked to Ootemachi Station and got on the Tozai Line, I could make it back to school faster than I would have on the Yamanote Line. I could make it work.

“How much time do you have, dear? My meeting is at one.”

“I have class at one.”

“Goodness gracious, so we both have some time to spare. Let’s enjoy a light meal together. Personally, I love their kuzukiri noodles and matcha—it’s sweet and refreshing.”

“.....”

If she “loved their kuzukiri noodles and matcha,” then Ms. Darling had to be a regular. She didn’t miss a step getting from the Keihin-Tohoku Line platform to this café, either. She had to *really* know the area. But if she just lied about “knowing little” of the city to get me to carry her trunk because it was too heavy, maybe it would be “boorish” to worry about it too much.

I figured I might as well, since I was already here, and got the same kuzukiri noodle set meal as she did. Given the location of the café, a lot of the people in the area were checking the departure time on their Shinkansen tickets. I was reminded of how I had taken the Shinkansen from here with Richard to Shin-Kobe in the past. It felt like a lifetime ago. Back then, I’d thought taking the civil service exam and hunting for a job in the private sector were both things I’d definitely do *someday*—just not right now. And only a year later, that “someday” had now become my current reality.

It was exactly what I'd expected to happen, of course. But sometimes, it can feel almost...disappointing when things go *exactly* as you expected. I'm just whining.

"Whatever is troubling you, darling? You look like you've aged a hundred years."

"It's nothing, I just, um...my friend suddenly went off to Spain."

"Oh dear. Spain? You mean the one in Europe? Not Shima Spain Village?"

"The one in Europe. And he just dropped that on me right before he left, too..."

"You poor darling."

Ms. Darling didn't seem to doubt the story, or be particularly shocked by the revelation. It wasn't that she was holding her tongue in polite disinterest—more like she was inviting me to keep talking. Her composure reminded me a lot of a certain someone.

Her pale, slender fingers caressed the yellow stone. The gem almost looked like a puzzle, with its many holes of various sizes. It had a way of drawing your eye to it, like a maze you'd never be able to escape once you entered it.

"I know this is kind of dumb and obvious, but...everything is always changing, nothing stays the same. But I think that's what makes gemstones so incredible, you know? It's like time stands still for them...but maybe that's what makes them such good mirrors."

"Mirrors?"

"It's something a friend of mine said. That gemstones are mirrors into their owners' souls."

"Oh, is that so? Intriguing."

I felt a twinge of impending danger when I noticed that she hadn't used her trademark "darling" or some variation in her response. She sounded extremely disinterested, too. I guess I'd run my mouth a little too much, as I usually did?

Our trays of kuzukuri noodles and matcha were promptly brought over. Ms. Darling thanked the server with a smile and took off her ring. *I guess she takes it*

off to eat. It is massive, after all.

Or so I thought—but I was wrong.

Ms. Darling handed the ring to me.

“This stone is called citrine. Not citron—citrine. Admittedly, they both come from the same word.”

“...Oh! It’s a kind of quartz!”

“That it is. You seem like you know a thing or two about this topic.”

Citrine. If I was remembering right, that was *kizuishou*—yellow quartz—in Japanese. As you might expect from the name, it was a kind of quartz. While it did occur naturally, unless the product was specifically labeled “natural,” it was usually heat-treated purple quartz—that is, amethyst. Étranger bought and sold some of it.

If it came from the same word as *citron*, it must’ve been named for its lemon yellow color. A while back, we’d had a customer who came in looking for topaz and just happened to know a lot about gemstones. He’d told me that back in the day in Europe, topaz and citrine were commonly mistaken for one another. I could see how. They were pretty similar in terms of color, at least.

This specimen was incredible. When I looked closely at the round holes, it seemed almost like the gem was filled with amber liquid that was spilling over. The diamonds surrounding it sparkled, but they served only to highlight its beauty.

“I made that ring. It’s one of my pieces.”

“Huh?”

“I’m a jewelry designer. Well, my cutter is German, but you get the idea.”

I guess the cutter is the artisan who actually cuts the stone? Which made her the one who took a cut stone—that is, a loose stone—and figured out how to turn it into a piece of jewelry. Did that mean the incredibly heavy trunk I’d been lugging around was full of super expensive jewelry?

“Are you curious about what’s in my bag now? It would be an awful bother if people got the impression that all jewelers carry the tools of their trade in their

bags everywhere they go. And dangerous, too. Do you really think a frail lady would do something that might put her in such grave danger?"

She smirked as she added that the trunk contained her "maidenly secrets." I guess she meant cosmetics, clothing, or something of the sort—though was that stuff really that heavy? The trunk had weighed several times as much as the luggage I took on my trip to England.

I frantically suppressed my impulse to ask her how long she was staying and instead nodded along to what she was saying.

"There are a lot of different careers in this world, but my work is unique. Designers come in many varieties, but how involved they are in the process of their craft depends entirely on the person and the company they work for."

"I didn't know that."

"Well, it's true. There are designers who just sketch their ideas and true craftspeople who do everything from the initial design to the production of the item themselves. Just saying you're a jewelry designer doesn't communicate much. Personally, I sit somewhere in the middle. Simply sketching a design and leaving it in someone else's hands is just too terrifying to contemplate—you never know what kind of monster the finished piece will be, unless you find a contractor you have full confidence in. And it's me the clients will blame for a 'poor' end product. At any rate, it's an industry of artisans."

"Like engravers or traditional carpenters, right? Or even guitarists?" I asked.

"Well, yes, dear. No one's going to cover my ass but me."

She told me all about how harsh the industry could be in her clear, collected voice. I adjusted my posture to sit up straight, and she chuckled like a dove.

"But I've never known joy so great as when things go well. This ring is a favorite of mine. The client it was meant for wasn't pleased with the poor thing, so I suppose I failed to deliver. That said, maybe the ring knew I wouldn't be able to bear to part from it. I can see how it might be a kind of mirror, in that sense."

She seemed to have more to say on the topic.

“You see, both stones and people change. Perhaps more importantly, the people looking *at* those stones and those people change, too, and through that change, discover their many charms. Yet people have this strange tendency to believe that they don’t change—that only the world around them does, leaving them behind. No?”

Feeling left behind. That was exactly how I was feeling in that moment. Was this mysterious woman telling me that I had changed, too, but simply wasn’t aware of it?

Ms. Darling chuckled again.

“Oh, forgive me for being preachy. You shouldn’t be so down, darling. You’re still young and have many an admirable quality. A college boy with a fondness for gemstones may as well be a national treasure. Your unique perceptiveness will prove to be a strength when you start working, don’t you think?”

“I’m not so sure about that... I haven’t exactly bought many stones myself. I just, um...”

I mumbled that I worked part-time at a jewelry store, and Ms. Darling beamed. “Oh, I see.” I expected her to comment on how unusual that was, but to my surprise, she didn’t.

“Even if you’re not buying gemstones on your own dime, I think it’s wonderful that you understand their appeal. If you’d been working part-time at a florist’s, you might have developed quite a fondness for flowers by now. Perhaps the fact that it turned out to be gemstones means something?”

She continued, saying that stones aren’t as passive as people often believe them to be.

“For example, citrine is said to ‘make dreams come true’ or bring ‘success in ventures.’ Some also say it brings luck in finding a job—but honestly, don’t you think it’s the amount of effort people put into such ventures, not a gemstone, that decides whether they succeed or fail?”

I let it slip out that she wasn’t wrong, but I never imagined I’d hear someone involved in the gemstone industry say that. Ms. Darling chuckled. I glanced down at the table and noticed that her dish of kuzukiri noodles was suddenly

empty. When did she find the time to eat them?

“Those who call themselves designers—that is, those who spend each day handing gems to customers—might feel differently. But customers put a great deal more thought into these things. They’re not going to buy something they don’t need, not in these trying times. If they need some kind of supernatural protection, they could just as easily visit a temple or a shrine. The reason people still buy gemstones, despite all that, is that they see something impossibly beautiful and think to themselves, ‘I can see the beauty in this.’ They feel a strong desire to *have* it. Sometimes, I think being a jewelry designer is closer to being an idol producer or a pinup photographer. I have to converse with both the customer and the stone, then use my knowledge and experience to determine how to present the stone in the best possible light. No matter how beautiful a gemstone might be, it’ll never be perfect from *every* angle—but then again, if all the stones in the world were perfect from every angle, they’d be rather boring.”

I mumbled, “So, basically, you’re not a real designer until you produce a product the customer is happy with?”

“Oh, darling!” Ms. Darling exclaimed again, sounding surprised. Then she smiled. “Precisely.”

“Personally,” she continued, “I believe beauty is power. The power of persuasion, perhaps? I do believe stones can be mirrors, but they can also be teachers and friends. They’re devilish, many-faced things. Selecting a piece of jewelry is most enjoyable when you start by deciding how you want to engage with a stone. That’s why I love customers who bring me a stone they’ve fallen in love with. We start off by chatting a great deal, so I can figure out how the customer wants to engage with the stone. I want to know what clothing they like, whether they’re a conscientious person or more rough around the edges, what kind of person they hope to become, and so on. It doesn’t always work, but when it does, it’s just delightful. One of my rings might become someone’s friend for all eternity, after all. Isn’t that just wonderful?”

I certainly thought so. I mean, who didn’t want a friend forever?

I told her as much, and Ms. Darling nodded, satisfied.

“Just as humans change over the course of their lives, so does the charm of any given gemstone. I feel like jewelry’s real power lies in its magnanimity—its ability to accept both its owner’s strengths and weaknesses and grow alongside them.”

Ms. Darling’s words resonated immediately with the closed-minded mentality I’d been directing at myself. Jewelry wasn’t just a possession to her but a conversation partner. She felt the most indulgent way to enjoy a gemstone was to respect it and grow alongside it—like your co-captain on the stormy seas.

Maybe it was kind of like how Hiromi and I had stuck together to get through everything after Grandma passed when I was in high school. Well, no—the atmosphere in the Nakata household back then was a little too turbulent to match what she was talking about. Ms. Darling was describing a relationship based on having a positive outlook and remaining open to the outside world.

Right now, I feel regret over having never called Shimomura by his first name, Haruyoshi. I’d always had a hard time feeling comfortable enough around people to call them by their first name. With the exception of Richard, who told me it was okay to just call him Richard when we met at *Étranger*, I pretty much called everyone by their last names. I guess it was kind of weird that I liked it when people called me Seigi, huh? Maybe I was just trying to keep them at a distance.

Haruyoshi should be arriving in Spain in about half a day. If I cheered him on by saying, “Good luck, Haruyoshi!” or “You can do it, Haruyoshi!” would he be mad at me? Oh, wait.

“Sorry, I know this might be a rude thing to ask, but could I take a picture of that citrine in your ring?”

“A picture? There’s a much greater difference between a real gemstone and a photo of a gemstone than even a painting in a museum and a postcard of the very same painting. Are you sure that won’t bother you?”

“It won’t, I’m sure. I think it’ll be a source of strength for me. But only if you’re okay with it.”

“Very well, then. Do as you please.”

Ms. Darling had said earlier that citrine was said to “make dreams come true” and bring “success in ventures.” Amethyst, the stone that citrine started out as, was said to protect against drunkenness. The thought that applying heat could change your fortunes like that was funny, but maybe that made it the perfect receptacle for people’s hopes and dreams.

My phone camera clicked repeatedly as I took photos of the labyrinth-like ring. I bowed my head to Ms. Darling when I finished, deciding to send some to Shimomura later.

For some reason, Ms. Darling stared at me intently as I used my phone. I had to wonder why. I asked her if there was something on my hand, and she smiled at me sweetly.

“I was studying them. Honestly, when I saw you carrying your friend’s bag, I couldn’t help thinking what beautiful hands you have. I wanted to observe them up close. That said, I was sure you’d send the police after me if I made such a request. So, I thought asking you to carry my bag and inviting you for some tea would be the better option.”

“Th-that’s a thing, right? Hand models?”

“Beats me. I don’t know a thing about it. You really do have strong hands, though. You wouldn’t happen to be a practitioner of some sort of martial art, would you?”

“I used to do karate...”

“Oh, darling, darling! Could you raise your right hand for me, then?”

“Like this?”

“Yes, just like that. And now your left.”

“Okay.”

The position made me feel like I was being held up at gunpoint. Ms. Darling chuckled softly.

“You really are an interesting boy. Now, stay just like that and take a look out the shop window. Right there.”

“Huh?”

I followed Ms. Darling's gaze as she suggested and looked straight ahead out the shop window.

And right there by the ticket barrier for the Shinkansen, just in front of the café's glass windows, was a certain heavenly creature. But he wasn't a suspicious-looking character with wings and white robes. He had pale blue eyes, porcelain skin, and perfectly styled blond hair. In one hand, he held the handle of a black wheeled suitcase. This man, who possessed enough beauty and wit to put anyone's mind at ease, was partly visible from the stairs leading to the subway's mall of specialty shops.

The living gemstone, Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian, stared intently at me as I sat there with my arms raised like the most impossibly, inexcusably, incredibly foolish creature possible. For some reason, Ms. Darling's laughter reminded me of a fairy-tale witch.

"I would like an explanation. A short one."

"She treated me to kuzukiri noodles and matcha as a thank-you for carrying her bag."

"I see. Now try that again in English," Professor Richard ordered in English.

I had been talking to Richard on the phone frequently of late. By frequently, I meant maybe once every two weeks—which was a step up from prior to this past winter, which was exactly zero. The objective was to improve my English—my *spoken* English, specifically. He was still head and shoulders above me, of course, but I'd realized he seemed to be enjoying himself. I think he liked teaching. I'd only recently learned that he studied foreign languages at a famous British university.

It was about eight o'clock at night when I made it home to my Takadanobaba apartment after class, and he called me around nine. We didn't have an English lesson scheduled today, but he must've found some time. I'd never expected to run into him in the station, either.

Using my junior-high-English vocabulary, I explained to him that after I'd seen my friend off at Shinagawa Station, I just happened to run into her. She said she

wanted to go to Tokyo Station and needed help carrying her bag. That was all.

It was a lot easier when you let your brain process what you were going to say before you opened your mouth, rather than blurting out something stupid in a panic. Richard even praised me, saying my English was better than I thought it was, and my grammar in particular was just about perfect, so I should feel more confident in my abilities. If I'd had a teacher like him back in junior high, I might have studied literature or English in college, rather than economics. Speaking of which, I'd been working on fixing my bad habit of dropping articles of late.

After we finished chatting a bit about the weather, Richard cleared his throat and switched over to Japanese. Our English lesson was over. Now, I supposed, it was time to chat. Which meant this was my opportunity to ask the question that had been on my mind all day.

"Who was that lady?"

"Maya Hamada. Head designer and member of the board of a Kyoto jewelry company—she's the president."

"The president?!"

Now that he mentioned it, she definitely didn't seem like she worked for anyone else. She had mentioned that any mistakes were her responsibility, too.

"I'm sure you have no trouble believing that, considering how eccentric she is. Her field of expertise is combining form and function to create practical designs for her metropolitan clients. She has many passionate fans. I will, however, refrain from commenting on her personality."

"Did she bully you or something?"

"Of course not. It was quite a bit more mutual than that."

Richard explained that when he was working under Saul in Sri Lanka, she had also learned about purchasing gemstones from Saul. I asked if she was like an older sister when they were both apprenticing with Saul, and Richard immediately insisted that he had been there first, so he had seniority.

"Saul may be my mentor, but that wasn't really the case for Maya. When she came to Sri Lanka, she had already won an international competition and was

hard at work being the president of a newly formed company. I think from her perspective, Saul is simply a nice man who taught her a few things."

"Oh, just like you now."

"Gee, thanks."

That said, he trusted her skill as a designer, and they had known each other for ages now, so they would send work each other's way. Maybe that was just how it works in the jewelry industry. The only part of it I was particularly familiar with was Richard's weekend gemstone café, but even I could think of a number of processes those gems had to go through—buying the stones, design, production, and sale—before becoming a piece of jewelry. It was work that required both time and money. And considering the sums involved, it only made sense to want to work with someone you knew you could trust.

But...

"Hey, Richard. I know this probably isn't an appropriate question, but I just have to ask...how old is she?" I asked timidly.

Her skin was so clear and she had such an innocent smile, but at the same time, she had such *presence*. And she was the president of a company. And four years ago she won that award and founded a company, so—

Richard went silent, as if he had anticipated all the questions running through my head. I gulped and mumbled, "I figured," under my breath.

"Did she say something to you?"

"Um, not really?"

"Let's just say that some things are better left unsaid."

"O-oh, got it."

In an attempt to change the subject, I told him what she'd spoken to me about—showing me the massive citrine on her ring, saying jewelry could become a lifelong friend, letting me take pictures of her ring. But I realized something while I was relaying all that.

"Hey, did you maybe show her a picture of me at some point?"

"I would never do such a thing. What makes you think that?"

"Just because she got my attention from some distance away. It makes me wonder if she recognized me somehow. She was so friendly when she approached me, too, saying my hands were handsome and stuff."

"...I only ask this to be certain, but you wouldn't happen to have been talking about me in a loud voice at the time, would you?"

"Huh? Why would I—"

Wait. I thought back to the conversation I had with Shimomura on the platform. We'd been talking about balancing job-hunting with my part-time job and my "literal angel" of a boss. I might have mentioned what kind of store I worked at, and she might have overheard that. Hm...

"M-maybe? My memory of the conversation is pretty fuzzy. I think the most she could have possibly gotten from the conversation was that I work part-time at your shop."

"So you did talk about me."

"I'm very sorry, sir!"

"I didn't ask because I was looking for an apology. I think I understand what she was after. I'm quite certain Maya wanted to repay you."

"Repay me? For what?"

Richard asked me if I remembered Mr. Onodera and his diamond tie pin. The name coming out of nowhere confused me for a moment, but when he mentioned the diamond tie pin, it hit me at once. I remembered. Mr. Onodera was one of our customers last year. He had come to Étranger early last summer to have the diamond from his late wife's engagement ring remade into another piece of jewelry—wait.

"Don't tell me."

"As I imagine you've guessed by now, that was Maya's work."

"Ooh!"

I would never forget the look of joy on Mr. Onodera's face when that soot-

stained diamond ring was reborn as a sparkling tie pin. It was already something of a fond memory...especially since a quick-witted part-timer had stopped him from canceling at the last minute. And that quick-witted part-timer was me.

“What a strange coincidence.”

“Indeed it is.”

Richard then asked me, in English, if there was anything else I wanted to talk about. He would always get like this at the end of our phone calls. Our calls weren't formal or professional in nature—they were mainly just to practice speaking English—but I felt like the business-like tone we always lapsed into toward the end betrayed both our personalities. We could both be a little awkward.

“Not really,” I told him—but then it hit me. “Oh!”

There *was* something I wanted to talk about. It was a question I'd wanted to ask him for a while but never found a good opportunity to. Richard, sounding a little surprised, asked what it was. I apologized, saying we didn't need to talk about it now, or even ever, if he didn't feel like it. After that lengthy preamble, I finally put forward my question.

“Why do you go by Richard Ranasinghe *de Vulpian*?”

That's what I wanted to know.

I understood that if Richard used his real name, it would have drastically increased the chances that the people trying to find him would succeed. I knew that was why he had borrowed Saul's last name, Ranasinghe. That much I knew. But I didn't know why he used his mother's maiden name, *de Vulpian*, too. Was it an attempt to throw people off, since the end result was such a hard-to-remember tongue twister of a name? I feel like he would have added another long name or two if that was what he was going for, though.

“...I don't mind answering you now, but I think it'll be rather late by the time I finish.”

“Oh, right, sorry. There's no rush. I was just curious, that's all.”

“Then perhaps in the near future, we can chat about it at Étranger.”

“All right. And—*goodnight, sleep tight.*”

It was a common English saying. I’d grown pretty confident with set phrases like this one, which I found easier to say in English than Japanese, where the nuance was different. As a bashful Japanese man, I didn’t think I was bold enough to say the same thing in my native tongue, but in English, it still felt like words borrowed from someone else. I felt much bolder when I was speaking English—though maybe I was just taking advantage of my very forgiving speaking partner.

Richard replied with the same phrase, as he always did, as if to—however gently—correct my pronunciation.

“I’ll see you again on Saturday.”

“You got it.”

And then he hung up.

I needed to do some self-reflection. The number one thing I needed to tell him remained the same—that it might soon become difficult for me to keep working at *Étranger*. But when should I tell him? I mean, this was Richard I’m talking about. He knew more about Japanese culture than I did. He was probably all too aware of the fact that this is the time when college students start job-hunting. Or at least I hoped he did.

Because if he didn’t, I couldn’t bear to imagine what such a kind person’s face would look like when I inevitably had to ask to quit.

No. I had it all backward. Obviously. I was terrified of the idea that I would tell him I needed to leave to find a full-time job, and he would just say, “I see,” with a calm, collected expression. I was pretty sure that would do a number on me. What would happen to my English lessons with Professor Richard in that case? I guess they’d be over, right? I’d just bought a safe from the hardware store to keep the rare gemstone that was one of his family heirlooms safe, so I didn’t think he’d *completely* cut contact with me, but working at *Étranger* was the foundation of our relationship. What would our relationship even *be* without that? Without a foundation, it would be washed away like a sand castle when the tide came in.

It was the obvious conclusion, but I couldn't bear the thought of going through that.

“.....”

I plugged my phone in to charge and lay down in bed, staring up at the ceiling. My text to my friend, Haruyoshi Shimomura, remained unread, so he was most likely still in the air. But he would probably be getting there soon. I was thankful for the fact that we lived in the information age, making it easy to communicate with someone even if they were on the other side of the globe. As long as the other party was willing, of course.

He'd made a point of reminding me to get my priorities straight. It wasn't like I didn't know how important it was to search for a full-time job or that I had to thoroughly assess my own preparedness for the civil service exam. I had to do all that to get my life in order. But despite it all, I hoped I could somehow find a way to maintain my relationship with Richard.

I felt like the photos of the labyrinthine piece of citrine were telling me to seek answers within it. Then again, if what Maya said was right, then I must've changed over time, too. Maybe I already had the answer and just didn't realize it. But what was it?

Trying to figure out a career was a process that involved taking a cold, hard look at yourself in the mirror. So what *was* it? I had to have something. At least, I hoped I did. But...

...for some reason, I had a feeling I was going to come up empty-handed.

“.....”

Sometimes, I felt like life was like a board game with ridiculous challenges printed on every single square. You couldn't progress to the next square until you solved the challenge on the current one, but you never knew what you needed to solve until you got there, so you had to rely on your experience and skills to see you through. I vaguely remembered seeing a segment on a variety show set in a cold region where they used frozen fruit to hammer nails in, in lieu of having an actual hammer. That was kind of what life felt like to me right now.

Putting up a front wasn't going to get me anywhere. I had to ask myself—when stripped of everything extraneous, what did I have left? Even a guy like Richard, who seemed to have and know everything, said that things frequently didn't go his way.

“Aghhh...”

Worrying wasn't going to do any good. Besides, my job hunt was only just on the prelude stage. I had a ways to go until the climax. I had time to think. But first things first: I needed sleep.

Admittedly...I had a feeling it was going to take me quite a while to actually doze off tonight. Just as I was thinking I might as well make some matcha pudding or something if I was going to be up until all hours anyway, I received a photo on my phone. The sender was a familiar name. He and Saul were the only people I had registered in my phone in Latin characters rather than hiragana.

There was no text accompanying the picture, which looked like it had been taken at a desk in a hotel room and featured a single loose gemstone sitting on top of a memo pad. It was a yellow stone, but the one end was faintly purple. Bi-color tourmaline, maybe? I was pretty sure that was pink and green, like a watermelon, but maybe it came in these colors, too? Wait, wait—that yellow looked familiar. So did the purple. He probably wanted me to take a guess.

“A citrine and amethyst hybrid?” I sent back. Richard replied with “Warm.” So I wasn't right, but I wasn't completely off-base either. Curious, I asked him what the correct answer was.

“*Ametrine.*”

A piece of quartz featuring both amethyst and citrine—ametrine. *I see, it's a combination of the two names.* Richard added in English that he'd only said I was “warm” because the word *hybrid* meant something man-made, which wasn't appropriate for this natural piece of ametrine. He used simple words in his explanation, so even I could understand it.

The amethyst part was on one side, and the natural citrine was on the other—with neither mixing together. The citrine was a lighter, more champagne color than the citrine in Maya's ring, and the simple square cut of the piece inspired such poetic imagery as Kyoto at dusk. I really liked the color.

“What an interesting stone!”

“And the name is so simple and straightforward, it makes it feel familiar already!”

“I like how easy it is to understand.”

I shot off three texts in a row. Richard replied that my impressions were very in-character for me. In English, again. It was weird—even though the text on my phone was switching between Japanese and English, I heard it all in Richard’s usual voice. I guess I was talking to the same person, so the language switching didn’t matter all that much.

Citrine, a stone that made your dreams come true, and amethyst, a stone that protected its owner from intoxication—what did it mean when the two were combined? “Keep your dreams sober and rational,” maybe? If that was true, it was a wonderful sentiment—keeping one eye on your ideals and one eye on reality as you moved forward.

But there was still one big lingering question: Why did Richard show me this stone? And why would he go out of his way to open that massive suitcase of his right before bed to do so?

I started to wonder if my unsettled mental state might have carried over the radio waves to him. That was a scary thought. *There’s no way.*

Still, I was grateful. Richard really did still have that calming effect on me.

“Thank you. I’ve never seen anything so beautiful,” I sent back in Japanese along with a hands-pressed-together emoji. His response was in Japanese, too.

“You’re quite welcome. And I know.”

He punctuated his message with a hand-waving-goodbye emoji, closing our little English lesson again. What did he mean by “I know” in response to me saying the stone was beautiful? It didn’t quite make sense, but not enough for me to specifically question it.

I was doing some exercises and stretches to help myself fall back to sleep when all of a sudden—

“That was a mistake.”

"I didn't mean to send that last message."

"Please pay it no mind."

He always was one to be attentive about following up on things.

"Understood," I replied and took a deep breath.

It wasn't until I'd done ten sit-ups that it hit me. We had a tendency to drop subjects in Japanese, since meaning was easy to understand from context. But that also meant sentences could often be easily misinterpreted.

He must've mistaken what I'd intended to call "beautiful." He must've sent his initial reply, then thought I'd meant *him*, not the stone.

"....."

I considered replying that he got it right the first time, but decided it was too much trouble. If he still remembered the incident next Saturday, I'd explain it to him then.

Meanwhile, I received a reply from the other side of the globe. My friend, Haruyoshi Shimomura, had apparently arrived in Granada, where the sun was only just setting. *"It's been a super long day!"* he sent along with a selfie. Behind him was arid, light brown land. I'd never seen land that color in Japan. It looked a bit like the citrine I'd just been shown.

I cheered on Shimomura, who'd said he'd be a year behind me on the job hunt. And I wished my friend, who had gone one step further than I had in his headlong plunge into adventure, all the luck in the world.

We were prepping *Étranger* to open next week when a delivery guy came rushing to the door, holding a heavy-looking cardboard box. He asked if it was okay to leave it at the door. What was it? It looked like a box of bottled drinks—but there could be anything inside.

While the owner was busy in the back communing with his gemstones, I checked the name of the sender and was shocked to discover it was Maya. The return address was in Kyoto, so it must've been her. But why?

When he came out of the back, I showed the box to Richard. An incredibly

upset expression crossed his face for a moment before he let out a little sigh and laughed. What? Maybe I shouldn't have accepted the package.

"It's your lucky day, Seigi. You've earned yourself a gift."

"A gift?"

I tore up the tape on the top of the box and found it crammed full of plastic drink bottles. They weren't full of water but tea. Twenty 500-milliliter bottles of what was probably the most widely distributed bottled beverage in Japan, Delicious Tea. What?

"Richard, what is all this..."

"As I said before, our relationship is rather one of mutual harassment. As I understand it, this tea is produced by her family's company. Naturally, the moment I mentioned that I don't drink bottled tea, she took the first opportunity to send me a case. What a bother." He smirked cynically. "She just never learns."

For some reason, seeing his expression put me at ease. I didn't know the path he'd taken to come through Sri Lanka and Hong Kong and eventually make it to Tokyo, but I was pretty sure it wasn't an easy one. The fact that they'd kept this childish game going all this time must've meant that their little squabbles brought him some comfort, even back then.

I smiled. Richard smiled back icily.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing."

Luckily for me, I got to take the entire twenty-four pack of "Delicious Tea" back to my Takadanobaba apartment. I'd been looking forward to another delivery guy showing up with another massive box since then, but it hadn't happened yet.

c a s e

2

A Visage in
Sardonyx



IT WAS MORNING AT ÉTRANGER, and the news I was about to receive hit me like a bolt of lightning.

“Seigi, it appears Mr. Homura is getting married.”

Mr. Homura. *Married*.

His marriage was an event of particular significance to me. To explain why, I had to start by explaining who Mr. Homura was.

He was a man in his late twenties, and the son and heir of Homura Trading, a company headquartered in Marunouchi. He may not have Richard’s dazzling beauty, but he did have an innate instinct for business and an air of unshakeable composure going for him. And by some twist of fate, I had gotten in the way of him getting married twice now.

The first time resulted from an incident at Étranger which Richard was involved in, too. I knew that sounded like I was making excuses, but I didn’t think things would have worked out well even if I hadn’t intervened. The second time, however, was entirely because I’d stuck my nose into his business with an “Excuse me but—”

I didn’t regret it. The first incident had been my first introduction to him, which left me wondering why I ended up wreaking havoc on his love life every time I encountered the man. If he punched me in the face today, I couldn’t blame him. Honestly, it might even make *me* feel better if he did.

“Hey, Richard...does Mr. Homura have an appointment to come to the shop?”

“He does not. Why do you ask?”

“I just feel like I absolutely should not see him.”

“And why is that? Are you in some sort of dispute with him?”

“No! No! Nothing like that.”

We weren’t fighting. I just felt so bad about everything, I’d have to get down on my hands and knees and lower my head so far it’d sink into the earth and come out in Brazil. But even putting all that aside, I knew if I were Mr. Homura and was preparing to marry someone I really liked for the third time now, I sure

as hell wouldn't want to get anywhere near me, the angel of death.

Mr. Homura was a wealthy man with a good job who worked hard because he was painfully aware of his position in society. But people like him don't like their social "inferiors" to see how hard they're kicking beneath the water. He'd never shown me any resentment beyond what could be passed off as a gentle joke after either of our encounters, nor shown any anger on his face. He was the kind of person who knew he had to stay strong, even when things were tough. It had to be hard to keep that up for an extended period of time, though.

He kind of reminded me of my mother, Hiromi, in that respect—always trying to do everything on her own. Proud and always standing on their own. Maybe the trick to having a good relationship with someone like that was keeping just the right degree of distance and not pushing them too much.

"...I wonder if there's some way I can send him my congratulations without actually attending the ceremony."

"As a foreigner, I feel rather awkward offering you advice about your own cultural practices, but surely sending a card would be a safe choice?"

"I'm not brave enough to do something like that. I'll just send some money with no name attached. A 10,000 yen note's a 10,000 yen note, no matter who it comes from."

"Who do you think you are? Yukichi Fukuzawa? Don't be ridiculous."

I wanted to apologize at the very least. And I was well aware that I only wanted to do it to make myself feel better, but I really did want to apologize somehow. Even just a casual apology. If he asked me to help him propose with a flash mob, I'd do my best to play at least eight roles myself.

"I won't pretend to understand it, but it seems you've developed a rather complicated relationship with Mr. Homura."

"...Yeah, something like that."

Richard didn't pry any further. He probably thought it had to do with Tanimoto, the girl I adored—but unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

Mr. Homura had grown worried about me when Richard disappeared. He

suggested that maybe Richard had romantic feelings for me and had run off because of my feelings for Tanimoto. It had proved wildly off, as guesses went, but now that I thought about it, that might have been what gave me the last push I needed to go to England.

Anyway, no matter how much I racked my brain, I couldn't come up with a good way to apologize. And I couldn't imagine he'd invite me to the reception. Settling for never seeing each other again would probably be better than causing him more trouble with an ill-conceived apology, so I decided to avoid going near Tokyo Station for a while.

In the meantime, our first client of the day arrived—one of our regulars, Mr. Kei Otomura. Mr. Otomura was in his late thirties, and his first name was a bit unusual, being written with the character for “laurel” but pronounced “kei.” I couldn't help but feel a sense of camaraderie, considering my name was literally “justice.”

His complexion had a kind of washed-out look to it, his fine hair was brownish and fluffy, and his eyes were much closer to brown than mine. A painter who occasionally had solo exhibitions in Ginza, he had this air about him, like a wolf that had grown attached to people or a vagabond who answered to no one but himself. He seemed fond of both the royal milk tea I prepared and talking about gemstones with Richard, but he rarely bought anything from us. Or at least, he didn't buy anything *himself*.

“Welcome to Étranger, Mr. Otomura.”

“It's been a while, hasn't it, Richard? Ms. Nakagawa was very pleased with the wonderful necklace she bought in Ginza. She was very proud of it.”

“I must thank you again for putting us in touch. On another note, are you feeling quite well today?”

“Huh? Am I feeling well? Why do you ask?”

“I apologize for my forwardness, but you look a touch pale.”

“Haha, well I don't think I'm nearly as pale as you.”

From what I understood, Mr. Otomura was from a wealthy merchant family. He had inherited both a fortune and connections from his parents, and didn't

seem to have the most zealous work ethic. His visits to Étranger were pretty random, with plenty of instances where he'd call on a whim and ask if he could drop by if we had no other customers scheduled. My only real issue with him was that he often came bearing sweets that weren't to Richard's taste, meaning I ended up being sent home with them. I had no problem eating both fancy Ginza sweets and the convenience store rice crackers and snacks that Mr. Otomura preferred, but Richard was rather picky.

The other thing was that Mr. Otomura had a lot of friends that liked jewelry, maybe because of his connections in the art world or something. We'd get people he referred our way every now and then. He was a useful facilitator in that regard...though I had the distinct feeling that it was Étranger itself that he considered a friend, rather than Richard or myself. He was an interesting customer.

"I take it you're probably going on the job hunt soon, aren't you, Seigi? I've never had to do it myself, but I hear it's stressful. I'm sure you'll be able to handle it, but make sure you don't overtax yourself."

"It hasn't really started yet, but thank you. I'll try my best."

The unusual thing about this visit was that Mr. Otomura had specifically requested to take a look at a piece he wanted. Meaning he was actually interested in buying something. It was even more unusual, considering his usual M.O. was looking at leftover items that had been prepared for other customers and only rarely buying something small that happened to fit his budget.

Today, Richard's box of wonders was full of jewelry pieces I hadn't seen very often in Étranger. Nine pieces in three rows. It almost looked like a box of chocolates when he opened it.

"Cameos, as you requested, Mr. Otomura."

Cameos—oval-shaped ornaments with a design embossed in white carved into a soft-colored material. Doves and kittens, delicious fruits, and women's profiles in white relief rose out of a pink or green background. The soft colors made them look like images drawn in whipped cream on top of a strawberry-or kiwi-flavored bavarois. They had settings that looked a bit like metal frames, and some of them were adorned with diamonds or pearls. There were both chic

and gorgeous options in the lot. They all looked like brooches, but the settings seemed like they'd work as pendants, too, so like they could probably be worn a few different ways.

Mr. Otomura picked up one of the cameos before him and inspected it intently. The ground was a pale green, like an unripe apple, and featured a carving of a child with curly hair hugging a lamb.

"You really did find a lot of them for me. That must have taken some work... Oh, is this a saint? I've never seen one like that before. I guess they make cameos with that sort of imagery, too."

"Indeed it is. They're a rather common accessory choice—a sort of protective charm—for zealous Christians in Europe. Flower motifs and women's profiles seem to be more popular in Japan."

Richard added that there were a variety of different choices. He didn't acknowledge Mr. Otomura's comment about how hard it must have been to obtain them, being, himself, a swan who didn't want anyone to see how hard he was paddling beneath the surface.

"Seigi, take a look at this for a moment. These are made using the same technique as openwork carving. These are all stone cameos, right? Are there any made of shell in here?"

"They are all stone, just as you ordered."

"Thanks. See, Seigi, these are all stone cameos. They're made of agate."

"Huh! Agate!"

There it was. A frequent occupant of Seigi Nakata's "Stones I Know the Name of but Have No Concrete Impression of What They're Actually Like" list. I was pretty sure I'd learned the word *agate* back in junior high or high school, but couldn't have described what it meant if my life depended on it. I couldn't visualize it at all. All that remained in my memory was the name.

"Sorry, I'm a total amateur when it comes to cameos *and* agate. I don't know much about either."

"Oh, interesting. Richard, explain it to him please. I could use a refresher

myself, too.”

Richard blinked. He shot me a glance like an owner telling their dog waiting for food to “stay” before taking a sip of his tea and beginning to speak. I was grateful that Mr. Otomura had asked. It felt like ages since I last got to hear one of Richard’s lectures.

“Seigi, what comes to mind when you hear the word *suisho*? Do you remember what it’s called in English?”

“*Suisho*...crystal, right?”

“The scientific term is quartz or *sekiei* in Japanese. A crystal is the term used to describe the shape quartz forms in.”

So “crystal” wasn’t exactly *wrong* as a translation of *suisho*, but it more accurately meant the specific formation—like those long pointy guys you thought of when you heard the word. Quartz was the more technically accurate answer. Richard continued, asking me to name all the quartz varieties I could think of. I could handle this one. I’d seen my fair share of stones working at this place for a whole year now.

“Well, I guess there’s your basic colorless quartz, and the purple kind is amethyst, yellow is citrine, then there’s ametrine, too, the pink kind is rose quartz, and then there’s...smokey quartz.”

“Bravo. I see staying up late hasn’t hampered your memory.”

I’d only stayed up late last night because of my English conversation practice with Richard... I’d asked him about whether they used job application forms outside Japan, and what people wrote on their resumes in England, and before I knew it, it was one thirty in the morning. I knew Richard was a good conversationalist, but I really screwed up last night. I felt a bit guilty about it.

“Then what of carnelian and chrysoprase? Do you remember them?”

“Huh?”

Of course I remembered them. Carnelian is a red stone and chrysoprase is green. I’d seen them in the shop every once in a while. They weren’t particularly translucent and were both classified as semiprecious stones.

“Wait, are those also kinds of quartz?”

“Precisely. In very broad terms, they could be considered types of quartz.”

“Really? But those stones aren’t sparkly like quartz at all.”

“You’re right, they’re not.” Richard nodded. “The quartz family is divided into two major categories: crystalline and cryptocrystalline. The stones you named earlier—citrine, amethyst, rose quartz, and so on—belong to the former, while carnelian, chrysoprase, and bloodstone among others generically known as chalcedony, belong to the latter. Using your description just now as a point of reference, the ‘sparkly’ or in other words highly translucent stones are crystalline, while the more opaque ones are cryptocrystalline.”

“Why does the difference in transparency change their classification?”

Richard explained that it was because of the size of the quartz crystals that make up the mineral. Material made up of larger crystals visible to the naked eye was crystalline, while material made of very fine crystals only visible under a microscope was cryptocrystalline. Hrm, sounded confusing. I wondered if the Japanese terms might be less confusing, so I asked Captain Trivia what they were and was disappointed to discover they were no less complicated. *Oh no, we’ve gotten off topic.*

“Umm, weren’t we talking about agate? Is agate somehow related to this stuff?”

“Of course it is. Agate is a cryptocrystalline stone. Seigi, have you ever seen a beautiful striped stone before?”

“A striped stone? Oh...”

I was pretty sure I had. Like black and white stripes or white and orange. I told Richard that, and he smiled.

“That was agate. Striped chalcedony is what we call agate. You finally figured it out.”

I finally understood why Richard had gone to the trouble of explaining all that annoying stuff to me. Agate was a term for a kind of quartz. It was like trying to explain what a Japanese-style hamburger steak with grated cheese was to

someone who didn't even understand the concept of ground beef. If you wanted to give them an accurate explanation, you'd have to start by explaining what ground beef even was. I was grateful that Richard didn't cut corners when it came to this sort of thing.

"There are different types of agate as well. Black agate is called onyx, while red agate—agate with stripes of carnelian—is called *sard onyx*, although linguistic shifts have transformed the term into *sardonyx*. Agate is sometimes called jasper in the west, but the distinction between the two isn't terribly important from a jewelry perspective. Ultimately, the difference comes down to the structure of the mineral. Perhaps you should consult your mineral expert friend about the topic."

I said I would with a smile. A certain someone's face immediately came to mind even without naming her.

But wait, hang on.

"Um, Mr. Otomura."

"Yes? What is it?"

"You said all these cameos were made of agate, didn't you? But..."

I couldn't see any stripes in the pastel-colored brooches, no matter how hard I tried. Where had the agate's bands gone? I asked, and Mr. Otomura laughed, amused.

"Good question. I guess you wouldn't know how they're made, after all."

"Huh? Does that have something to do with it?"

"Seigi, think about how relief carving would be done. The banding pattern should give you a hint."

Carving. Banding. Thinking about it was easier said than done. I wondered if I'd be given riddles like this during job interviews. Two layers. Two colors. I let out a groan, and Mr. Otomura began to laugh.

"Seigi, my friend, try thinking about the agate's stripes like layers of a shortcake. If you carefully cut off the whipped cream, you'd be able to see the color of the sponge underneath, right? And if you used that technique to create

an image—”

“You could make a cameo!”

“Precisely,” Richard said as he sipped his tea. Thanks to Mr. Otomura’s hint, I finally got it.

They also made cameos out of shell instead of agate. I guess cameos were kind of like woodcuts but made of stone? Richard seized this opportunity to explain that there was another technique, whereby the design wasn’t carved in relief like with cameos but carved as a debossed image—kind of like a seal—called intaglio. Both techniques dated back to ancient Rome. People in the past sure had come up with some incredible things.

While I sat there for a moment, impressed, I noticed Mr. Otomura’s expression had changed. He was so relaxed just moments ago, smiling and drinking his tea, but now he had this blank, heartless expression on his face. What was wrong? He wasn’t the type of person to hold it instead of getting up to use the bathroom.

I casually looked over to Richard for answers, but his expression had hardened as well. I couldn’t discern anything.

“Mr. Otomura, are you sure nothing is wrong...?”

“Huh? Oh, yes, I’m fine. Don’t worry. You mentioned sardonyx earlier, didn’t you? I was just thinking now was as good a time as any.”

Mr. Otomura rifled through the black bag that sat next to him on the lounge chair and pulled out an antique-looking jewelry box. This was the first time he’d done something like that. He had a good enough eye for gems that even Richard recognized it, so I was sure he had some fine pieces of jewelry at home, but this was the first time he’d ever brought anything with him.

He took a pale pink cameo out of the box. No, maybe “cherry blossom” was a better description of the color than pink. A woman’s profile was carved in relief against the slightly uneven, rose-colored background. The thing that really stood out about it was her hair, done up in a classic Japanese style. That had to be unusual. She held a white rose in the delicate fingers of her right hand, which were nearly touching her lips. It seemed like she was enjoying the

flower's fragrance. It almost looked like her clothes were made of a material so soft that they could be stirred by a gentle breeze.

The whole thing couldn't have been more than 5 centimeters in diameter. The image was framed by a leaf pattern carved into a translucent cabochon that surrounded the cameo. It was probably quartz. What an elaborate design.

The beautiful jeweler cast his eyes down to look at the cameo before raising his gaze to look at Mr. Otomura. I felt like I could just about hear his golden eyelashes flutter.

"And this is?"

"Just a gift of sorts."

"A gift?"

"Yeah."

Mr. Otomura didn't say anything else as he retrieved the cameo from Richard and put it back in the jewelry box. The gesture reminded me of a noblewoman allowing someone to sit in her favorite chair. It must have been important to him.

"Why *are* women's profiles such a common motif on cameos? And why all profiles specifically? I've never seen a head-on face on a cameo before."

"The designs function somewhat like portraits. Perhaps profiles are useful when it is more desirable for the human figure to not attract too much attention, much like a landscape might."

"I guess there aren't all that many people who'd want to be stared at by a face in their jewelry."

Mr. Otomura's voice was strangely strained, almost like he didn't actually believe that but felt compelled to say it. For a few moments, he scrutinized the cameos Richard had collected for him. Then he looked at me like he just remembered something.

"Hey, Seigi, mind if I ask you a silly little question?"

"Huh? You want to ask *me* something?"

“I do. Have you ever experienced unrequited love?”

The question took me aback a little. It felt strange for the conversation between three men drinking tea to turn to romance. We weren't high school girls, after all...

But in truth, I had. I definitely had. In fact, I was currently experiencing it.

Shouko Tanimoto was entering her third year of college this year, just like me. She was a student at the Kasaba University's college of education and the “mineral expert friend” Richard had just alluded to.

She wanted to become a junior high school science teacher. She'd be getting her license to teach high school at the same time, but she said she preferred junior high. Her favorite color was white, her favorite treat was cream soda, and though she was the most adorable angel, she got this serious look on her face whenever she talked about rocks and minerals that had earned her the nickname “Golgo Tanimoto.” She was so, so cute, but also incredibly strong, I couldn't even count how many times she'd cheered me up by saying just the right thing.

And I happen to like her—enough so that when she nearly got engaged to Mr. Homura, I jumped in to tell them to wait. While I was glad I did it, I still hadn't been able to tell her I was in love with her and wanted her to go out with me. Because I knew the moment I said it, things would change. As far as I could tell, she only saw us as friends. And that made me extremely happy, but it also made me want to cry.

There was no way I could breathe a word of any of that to Mr. Otomura.

“...Probably about as much as anyone has.”

I had to ignore my heart's complaints that there was nothing typical about the complicated mess I was in. Richard ignored me, which told me I'd made the right call.

Mr. Otomura didn't seem very pleased with my answer, but he nodded. “I see. A long time ago I had someone like that in my life, too. Unrequited love is painful, but there were good times as well. Being in love with someone just adds color to your life.”

“Totally! I mean, yeah, I guess that could be true.”

“...You certainly have a lot of energy today, Seigi, my friend.”

“I do!” I responded quickly, before my boss could cut in. I wanted to avoid forcing Richard to join the conversation. Though I didn’t know the details, I had a feeling it might be an uncomfortable topic for him. What little I knew of his romantic history was a little too sad for this conversation.

As I thought that, my boss stared at me intently, then let out a gentle *hah!* He shot me a glare, making sure Mr. Otomura couldn’t see him doing so. It was a glare that cautioned me not to get too carried away. His beautiful blue eyes seemed enchanted with the power to peer right into my soul.

“Mr. Otomura, have these cameos brought back old memories?”

Mr. Otomura smiled. I took that as a yes, but what he said next was not what I expected.

“Now, this is just hearsay, but I’m told Richard here is a veritable Sherlock Holmes—able to solve mysteries from the tiniest of hints. Although Holmes wasn’t an armchair detective, so maybe The Old Man in the Corner is a better fit. Admittedly, I think you’re probably more than a bit too handsome for the role.”

“I am quite flattered that you’re familiar with the literature of my homeland, Mr. Otomura, but those are some great expectations to foist upon a humble jeweler such as myself. Where did you hear such a thing?”

“You just happened to come up when I was having lunch with the owner of an antiques shop in the area.”

It seemed the source of the gossip this time was Itou Shoubin Co. It had been Mr. Homura the last time something like this happened.

Mr. Otomura took the jewelry box with the cameo in it and gently turned it toward Richard.

“How about a test? Do you think you can solve the mystery of me and this cameo?”

Richard looked a little troubled by the request, but Mr. Otomura pretended

not to notice. He seemed intent on forcing the issue. It was odd... I'd only realized this once the topic of unrequited love came up, but Mr. Otomura really wasn't acting like himself today.

"...This cameo has a fascinating history. It was a gift from a man to a woman that, eventually, made itself to me. As you may have surmised already, this woman was the object of my unrequited affection, and this man was my competition for her heart."

It sounded like a love triangle. I glanced over at Mr. Otomura, unsure if my presence was still appropriate, but he just looked back at me and smiled. I guess he didn't care.

"I loved her. But she didn't feel the same way about me. There wasn't really anything I could do about it. I knew it just wasn't meant to be. No matter how I may have felt, I knew the reasonable thing to do was give up. That is, until she sent me this."

Mr. Otomura explained that the pink cameo was a gift from her. A gift, not a loan, he added. What did that mean?

"I don't think she was just trying to get rid of it. I know how much this cameo means to her. There had to be a reason she gave it to me, right? But I have no idea what that reason could be. She didn't include a message—just sent it to me. If she's trying to tell me something, I don't know what it is. It's like finding a letter in a bottle, only the letter turns out to be blank. I thought you might be able to help me solve it, which is why I made the appointment today. I'm sorry for wasting your time."

He smiled.

"Perhaps it truly is outside your purvey as a humble jeweler after all." But his gaze lacked his usual indistinct expression, eyes focused and earnest. "If you can solve this mystery for me, I'll buy the most expensive of these cameos for whatever price you ask. I won't negotiate for a discount either. That's a pretty good deal, isn't it?"

An ominous chill hung over the shop.

Richard was a talented salesman, but he wasn't fond of approaching

gemstones from a purely monetary angle. To him, beautiful pieces of jewelry had a certain special *something* beyond their commercial value—almost like they were living things. He didn't like to do business with people who didn't understand that. Mr. Otomura was welcome in *Étranger* because he *did* understand it, and quite well, at that. Whether it be topaz, aquamarine, or any other kind of gem, he always had unique words of admiration for each stone he was presented with, treating them with care. He wasn't opposed to negotiating a deal, but I'd never seen him so abruptly turn the conversation from emotion to cold hard business.

Mr. Otomura had a detached smile on his face. He looked like he was ready to fight—that much was clear to both Richard and I without him saying a word. I had to admit I was curious, though. Maybe the woman in question was just changing up her personal style? Or maybe something had happened between his unrequited love and his romantic rival?

Richard seemed to have calmly accepted the situation.

"Just to be clear, you are certain that the person who sent you this cameo is aware that you know she received it as a gift from someone else?"

"Oh, she knows. She knows and she still sent it to me."

Obviously, I didn't know her, but she'd have to be really shameless and insensitive to send a present another man had given her to a guy who harbored affection for her. It would taint both her honor and Mr. Otomura's sincerity, wouldn't it? Or maybe not, depending on the time and the circumstances?

I worried for his heart. I hoped this would be a mystery worth solving.

I glanced over at Richard to look at his face. The beautiful jeweler had already taken the cameo. The girl with the Japanese hairstyle in the carving only showed him her profile, as if she couldn't be bothered to turn to look at him. I was pretty sure only a still image would be capable of treating Richard so coldly.

"Firstly, regarding the material the cameo was made of, it does appear to be sardonyx."

"That's what I was told."

Sardonyx. Going off the explanation earlier, that was agate with stripes of

carnelian. Mr. Otomura waited for Richard to continue. Richard looked a little hesitant but ultimately fulfilled his client's expectations.

"...I believe the person who gave this to your beloved was an older man. I also suspect that both of them are older than you, Mr. Otomura."

"Right on both accounts. Incredible. What tipped you off?"

"This cameo was produced by an extremely talented craftsperson. I believe one would have to be of an appropriate age to give something of that nature to a woman. Additionally, cameos are considered a rather dated accessory, not just in Japan but globally. I think sapphire or pearls would have been more likely choices as a gift of this nature and price range for someone of your generation, Mr. Otomura."

"And that's how you concluded they must be older. I see. You really are a talented detective."

Richard responded with a courteous bow. He was being made to solve the mystery, but he was in no particular rush to reveal all the cards in his hand. He was probably only doing this because he'd established a friendship with Mr. Otomura through their interactions thus far. If I had to guess, Mr. Otomura probably trusted Richard not to say anything he shouldn't. And Richard had probably decided to play along since he had bonded with Mr. Otomura as a fellow gem lover. That said, I had no idea how things would turn out as a result. The only thing I could do was make some more tea.

I got up, trying my best to become invisible as I tiptoed into the kitchen to add ice to the royal milk tea I'd prepared earlier to make two glasses of iced royal milk tea. The two of them fell silent as I cleared their empty glasses. Richard hadn't given up but wasn't about to say anything else, so Mr. Otomura forced a smile to urge him to continue.

"What's wrong? I don't think you're all out of ideas already. You can say anything, I won't mind. I'm sure you've figured out at least one or two more things about it."

"You think so?"

"I know so. You see, you're an honest man, Richard. The face you make when

you have nothing to say and the one you make when you do but are choosing not to speak are quite different. Don't you agree, Seigi?"

I did agree, completely, but I knew it wasn't the appropriate place to say that. I tried feigning ignorance just with my expression, and Mr. Otomura chuckled. Richard looked a little displeased. I guess my performance was a massive failure. What an embarrassment. I was pretty sure I'd done a good job with the tea, so I hoped he would forgive me.

Richard's expression shifted. His blue eyes were now tinged with sorrow as he looked intently at Mr. Otomura.

"I mean no disrespect, but was the person who gave her this cameo her husband?"

Husband? Wait. She has a husband?

Mr. Otomura went quiet for just a moment before smiling.

"Correct. Could you tell me how you came to that conclusion?"

"The meanings associated with sardonyx. It is an August birthstone, but it's primarily known as a stone that promises happiness in marriage. It's a popular stone as a gift for one's spouse. There are other types of agate that could have been used to make a cameo, but this design is so intricate, it's only natural to assume that the choice of material was similarly deliberate and meaningful."

Mr. Otomura showered Richard with praise with a smile on his face. Richard bowed without saying a word.

Étranger was unusually quiet today. When Mr. Otomura said it "wasn't meant to be," he must have meant she had a husband, so they could never be together. I guess that made this whole thing some kind of illicit affair? Like, the woman Mr. Otomura was in love with was married, and she gave him a gift her husband had given her? These were just my personal feelings on the matter, but it seemed like a mess no matter whose side you took.

Regardless, it was clear that the cameo was very important to Mr. Otomura. People were complicated, after all.

I decided to just quietly watch the conversation unfold.

“Anything else? That you may have left out.”

“...I do have some suspicions.”

Richard’s expression was a grave one. He was thinking very seriously about the topic. The mystery Mr. Otomura wanted solved was “why did this person give me this cameo?” I knew I shouldn’t speculate while she wasn’t even here, but it was hard to imagine a normal woman giving a man a piece of her jewelry if they didn’t have a pretty good relationship, right? If you asked me whether she cared for him, I’d say she had to. Even I could tell that much. I mean, even if she was married—or rather, *because* what she gave him was a gift from her husband—what could it possibly mean other than “I love you”? Richard must’ve come to the same conclusion, so why was he so deep in thought?

Oh. Maybe I had it backward?

Why *would* Mr. Otomura go out of his way to bring such a transparently obvious mystery to Richard?

My tiny brain worked as hard as it could. Was his judgment so poor he hadn’t considered the possibility? Even though *I’d* picked up on it? There was no way. Was he hoping Richard would tell him, “It’s because she loved you,” and smugly reply, “I knew it.” It couldn’t be. He wouldn’t look so ready to fight if that’s all it was. So maybe...

Maybe the gift had come from someone where it wouldn’t necessarily mean “I love you.”

I guess Mr. Otomura couldn’t stand to watch us squirm any longer, because he put on a strained smile. “I see. All right, how about I give you a little hint,” he said in a cheerful tone. “The woman who gave this to me was a member of my family.”

“Wait, family?”

I was so shocked I couldn’t hide it. Mr. Otomura smiled, though he looked like he was on the verge of tears.

“...Well, I might as well just tell you. She was my mother.”

“Wait, what?”

Richard shot me a scolding gaze. What an embarrassment. I opened my mouth completely out of reflex. *But, seriously, hang on a second. I mean, he said he got it from his unrequited love. Did that mean he had illicit feelings for his mother?*

I froze with a shocked expression on my face, halfway to sitting down. Whether because he felt bad for me or was just exasperated by my behavior, Mr. Otomura continued.

“She wasn’t my birth mother. She was my father’s second wife. I was just about twenty when my mother passed away, and my father remarried about five years after that, so I wasn’t living at home by then, but on my own, near the Tokyo University of the Arts. My father was never really much of a parent to me. Maybe he just wanted to fall in love again, now that he was an empty-nester.”

“Wh-where was your family home again?”

“Kanazawa. Our house was...well, I guess it’s more of a small estate.”

Kanazawa was in Ishikawa Prefecture. I was pretty sure one of the guys in my exam prep class was from there. I vaguely recalled him laughing about how cold and old-fashioned it was quite a few times over expensive alcohol. I guess that shouldn’t be surprising considering Ishikawa used to be known as Kaga, province of five million bushels during the Edo period. Even a small estate in that old city had to be full of rare and beautiful things. And Mr. Otomura probably had a lot of relatives there, making it a difficult place to live.

Mr. Otomura gave his usual detached smile, like he was one step removed even from his own life.

“She and my father were happy together. Their whole marriage. But I never thought of her as a mother.”

“...So did you ever, um, tell her?”

“Not directly, but I think I made it pretty obvious. At first, she tried to be very mindful of me because she thought I disliked her for taking my mother’s place. She couldn’t have been more wrong. Of course, she truly loved my father, so I’m sure she wanted me to consider her my mother.”

His voice had a self-deprecating tone to it as he mused that there was no way he could do that.

“I found it increasingly difficult to go home in the five years after my father died. A number of my relatives still lived at the house, but since she and I were so close in age, I thought it might inspire some nasty rumors if we spent too much time together, even if no relationship of the sort actually existed. And then, just like that, that was it.”

“.....”

That was it? That was what? Did she leave home or something? Or was there some other reason they couldn’t see each other after that? Mr. Otomura didn’t say anything else.

“I guess the real mystery I want to solve is, to put it simply, did she only love me as a son? Or did she have even the faintest romantic feelings for me? That’s what I really want to know. Ahh, I hate this sort of thing. Putting it into words always makes it feel so cliché and cheap.”

Richard’s face grew even more serious. I loved the way his face looked at times like these so much, I could just about die. There was a beauty to it, but also an intensity that gave you goosebumps. It was probably just his immense concern for the person he was talking to, leaking through despite him desperately trying to conceal it.

“Mr. Otomura, I mean no disrespect by this, but regardless of the nature of the love in question—if words render it cliché and inauthentic, perhaps it is not love at all but merely in service of your own emotional fulfillment.”

“You know, the way you put that is exactly what I’d expect from a jeweler. Gemstones might be beautiful, but they’re natural in origin. While their aesthetic value is determined by how beautifully they’re processed, that processing is ultimately a very pragmatic procedure that has to begin with *something*. My favorite paintings are the ones that take an empty canvas and add strokes to birth something out of *nothing*. They begin with an idea. I think there’s something much more fanciful about that.”

“Just as there are no paintings created entirely out of inspiration with no concern for medium or concept, no piece of jewelry is created without vision.

Both are the products of the marriage of practicality and imagination.”

“So it’s a balance between two elements. Just like this cameo.”

The beautifully sculpted woman kept looking to the side the whole time. I imagine Mr. Otomura was praying that she would eventually look his way. I could see how getting something like this from a person like that might not necessarily mean “I love you.” I could even see how it could be read as a polite rejection. But, man, talk about an overly vague present. Giving a gift that could be interpreted any number of ways to someone who wanted a definitive answer seemed...I wasn’t sure if I’d go as far as to say selfish, but it was cruel, for sure.

Mr. Otomura muttered under his breath as he gazed at the cameo, “She was always so kind to me, and she was a wonderful person both to my father and even my relatives who gossiped behind her back about how improper their May-December romance appeared. But that made me so sad I couldn’t bear it, and then before I got the chance to say anything she—I’m sorry, I didn’t mean for this to take such a gloomy turn.”

He added that her memorial service had just ended. Oh. Now I understood why he said, “That was it.” Because he ended up never seeing her again.

“She gave me the cameo after my father passed away. Thinking back on it now, that was probably when she found out she was sick. She had always played the role of caretaker, so no one noticed until her illness had progressed significantly. If only I’d gone home a little more often...”

“Mr. Otomura, would you care for something else to drink?”

“I’m fine. Since this cameo was a gift to her from my father, I imagine you’d now consider it a gift from a mother to her son. But, well, I’m feeling a little vulnerable right now, so I guess I wanted to hear some kind words from the beautiful jeweler with an incredibly discerning eye. I’m not sure how else to put this, but you have quite a way with words, Richard. I imagine you could find even the tiniest, most far-fetched element to a situation and use it to convince a customer of just about anything. That’s why I came here today, to impose upon your levelheaded kindness and enjoy Seigi’s delicious tea for some comfort.”

Mr. Otomura took a sip of his iced royal milk tea and laughed.

I felt a bit of a chill run down my spine.

There was clearly some kind of intent behind Mr. Otomura's expression just now. I mean, he'd come here because he resolved to do something, right? I couldn't imagine that he was just wanting to talk about the cameo. I was sure Richard had sensed it, too. Mr. Otomura seemed extremely exhausted, but he was trying to hide it. Maybe he hadn't recognized it himself.

Just what was going on with him? He had that sort of frantic quality around him that someone who'd suddenly decided to move out did when they'd just start haphazardly grabbing their belongings and cramming them into a small bag and saying "bye" when it's full. It seemed precarious. It was the kind of scary where you could be pretty sure that if you were to ask the person where they were moving to, they wouldn't be able to answer. Since they probably hadn't even thought it out that far.

He had this air about him like he just wanted to leave. What was I supposed to do? I had no idea. As if reaching for the spider's thread, I turned to the man sitting across from Mr. Otomura:

Richard.

He was beautiful, but not intimidating, as he raised his gaze to look directly at Mr. Otomura.

"My part-timer here certainly struggled to understand how the members of the quartz family differ."

I was flabbergasted. Why of all things was he changing the topic of conversation to my uninspiring mental abilities? Mr. Otomura was suffering over his illicit romantic feelings, wouldn't the abrupt change in topic break him when he was in that kind of serious mood? Would he be okay? I mean, it had to be. This was Richard, after all.

"I believe that those categories don't exist for the purpose of separating the minerals but to group them together. When presented with a green stone and a pink stone, for example, humans can use the power of science to understand that despite their different colors, they are, in fact, related."

“I see. Continue.”

“Do you think we could ever create perfect classifications for feelings?”

Mr. Otomura’s pasted-on smile remained on his face. I wanted to cheer Richard on and tell him not to give up. I was pretty sure Mr. Otomura wasn’t in a very good place in that moment, but I liked him. Sure, I envied his carefree lifestyle, but never once did he look down on me when I served him. He never commented on how weird it was for a man to be working at a jewelry store either. I actually remembered him saying that seeing other men in a place like this put him at ease. If only there were more people like him in the world.

“I do not believe that there is a great enough difference in the hearts of those who cherish another to despair over.”

“Say, for example, you love someone in a romantic sense, but that person doesn’t even consider you a romantic possibility. You’re just someone they ‘care about deeply.’ In Japanese, we call this a ‘living death.’ Perhaps you have a similar phrase in English.”

“If you mean in a literal sense, then I’d say ‘half-dead,’” Richard said. He had the same air about him as he did when he was giving me English lessons, but there was something a little sharper about his tone.

“But I believe my homeland has a much more appropriate expression for situations like this one.”

His English demonstration was much longer this time. It sounded like a poem. I heard something about roses and names, but I couldn’t understand the rest of it. But I could tell that it was beautiful, whatever it meant. If your ears could drink, I think this would be a particularly tasty beverage. Mr. Otomura seemed to be able to follow it, and when Richard finished, a smile formed on his lips.

“...Shakespeare, right? From Romeo and Juliet.”

“Indeed it is. ‘Is there something to a name? Even if were we to call a rose by some other name, it would not lose its sweet fragrance.’ While I realize these are Shakespeare’s words translated into Japanese by a literary scholar, I don’t believe they have lost any of their weight in the process.”

A rose. Even I could tell that the flower the woman in the cameo was holding

was a large rose. The woman had a romantic expression, but something about her looked a bit sad. I wondered if the cameo had been carved in the likeness of the woman Mr. Otomura adored. Or maybe the artist created such an unusual design because a Japanese person had ordered it.

Mr. Otomura took his time inspecting each and every word, almost like they were pills of some sort of medicine, before swallowing them all down and smiling again. The face he was making was hard to look at. Had Richard not prevailed? Mr. Otomura wasn't the enemy, but the despair that had him in its grips. No, it wasn't over yet. As long as Mr. Otomura was still in the shop, that meant he still wanted to talk to us.

"If only you weren't so driven, Richard. You aren't going to let me escape into the world of daydreams, are you? You're imploring me to dream in the real world. Have you ever loved someone who didn't reciprocate those feelings? I'm not talking about some little crush but the kind of love where you would do anything for them, but they wouldn't even look your way."

"I have, actually."

Mr. Otomura laughed out loud. It was probably hard to believe. But I didn't respond, saying that it was true, I just turned to look at him. He looked a little shocked for a moment. He probably thought he'd said something rude. But he still seemed a bit in disbelief. Maybe he thought Richard was trying to humble-brag or something.

"...Really? How did you feel in that situation?"

"Awful."

"How awful?"

"I wanted to die."

"I wanted to crawl off to somewhere none of my friends or family or acquaintances were and die without any of them knowing," the beautiful jeweler continued in a slow, methodical tone. His voice was so quiet. I remembered something Richard's mentor, Saul, had said. That when he met Richard in Sri Lanka, Richard was a foolish man trying to con people. Sri Lanka is, after all, very far away from England.

Mr. Otomura seemed to sense from Richard's attitude that this wasn't a story he'd made up on the spot in an attempt to comfort him.

"...But you didn't."

"So it would seem."

"Do you mind my asking what made you give up on the notion?"

"Unfortunately, I must confess that there was no particular reason. At some point, I realized I had simply grown tired of despair. Humans are strange creatures. Perhaps rather than the body being ruled by the mind, the mind is simply afforded a place to exist within a body. Intense emotions are like bursts of movement. Just as there are no cheetahs who can run at top speed for thirty minutes straight, and just as someone who managed to summon superhuman physical strength in the face of an emergency can't maintain it in their everyday life, intolerable emotional pain can't last forever. That experience taught me that if you are certain you want to die, you cannot hesitate."

Wait, hang on. That sounded a lot more like he was giving him advice about how to commit suicide properly. I couldn't let that stand. But before I could open my mouth, Mr. Otomura laughed and said the same thing himself. Richard shrugged.

"I'm just speaking of my own experience. Nothing more."

"...I see. So do you still want to die?"

"Good question. I can't say my answer won't change someday, but I don't think I do anymore."

"Because you found a new love?"

"I would prefer to refrain from going into that topic for the moment."

Richard flashed him a brilliant smile. He was making a joke. After Mr. Otomura laughed a little, he looked at me for some reason. I took it as him telling me that my boss was struggling. I forced a smile back to say "he sure is," and Mr. Otomura's smile grew distinctly bitter.

"...I know this is an extremely rude question, and you'd be well within your rights to tell me to never come back here again for asking it. You're an

extremely beautiful person, but have you ever imagined yourself in twenty, thirty, or even forty years when you've aged so much that not even a shadow of your former glory remains? Did what you imagined frighten you? Have you ever imagined yourself becoming unlovable?"

For some reason, Richard looked happy in response to the question and slowly smiled.

"I am flattered by the compliment, but whatever shape it may take, a face is still a face. People who judge me by my face—be it because they think it's beautiful or hideous—are expressing their feelings, not mine. While the question of how one will face and ultimately accept the inevitability of their own aging is a deeply intriguing topic, I believe that the deterioration of one's physical appearance isn't core to the question but merely a side effect of sorts."

"I am actually looking forward to it a bit," he added. He was telling the truth. His good looks hadn't always had the most positive effect on his life.

Mr. Otomura seemed a little more collected now. And then he shifted his gaze from my boss to me. Huh? What? Me? Why?

"Seigi, my friend, would you allow me one question? It's something I'd like to ask you, not your boss—that's all right, isn't it, Richard? I promise it won't be anything strange," he said and gently picked the cameo up out of the jewelry box and handed it to me. The lady holding the rose was sitting in my hands.

"What do you think about this cameo? I always interpreted her sideways gaze as a lack of romantic interest in me, but that she didn't mind my looking. Admittedly, that sense of rejection might be all in my head, but what do you see in it?"

Why me? He should have asked Richard if he wanted a good answer. But that was when it hit me: He didn't want a good answer. I'm the kind of person who wears my heart on my sleeve—whatever I'm thinking always comes right out in my face or my body language. I guess you could say that I can't hide my feelings and am honest to a fault, and that's exactly the kind of person Mr. Otomura wanted a take from.

Considering his attitudes toward things, he'd probably find what I had to say more trustworthy.

All right, now's my time to shine.

"Um...well, this is gonna end up being kind of personal, but—"

"Go right ahead."

"There's this girl I really, *really* like. I've been in love with her since last year, but I haven't been able to tell her yet."

"Huh."

Mr. Otomura let out a strange sound. He looked at Richard as if to ask, "Really?" Richard calmly nodded. I didn't understand. Why was he checking with my boss about something related to *my* personal life? Well, whatever. It's not like Richard didn't know this.

"And she, um, she was going to get married. But in the end she didn't, because I intervened, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her the truth," I confessed. "I could tell her that I didn't want her to get married, but I couldn't say, 'I love you.' I'm pretty sure I lost my chance to ever say it now...but...but I still love her regardless. And I know that's stupid."

But I really did still love her.

Just thinking about her made it feel like spring in my heart.

"Earlier, Richard said that maybe if it feels cliché and inauthentic, then maybe it's just in service of your own emotional fulfillment, but I think that actually loving someone else in general *is* ultimately about your own emotional fulfillment and that there really isn't anything more to it than that. I mean, that's just how I feel about it, of course! It's just that, I think you 'love' this person *because* they make you feel that intense happiness, but...whether you can make the person you love feel that same happiness isn't up to you. I think a lot of times it's the source of more trouble than anything."

I couldn't explain it very well. But Richard was letting me talk. In Richard's case, keeping quiet was his loudest cheer—this man, who was unstoppable when his mouth was open, was ceding the opportunity for him to use his most powerful weapon...to me. I couldn't let him down.

"Mr. Otomura, it's like you want to play a game of emotional catch with the

person you love, but you're suffering because you can't. But that person gave you this cameo..."

In that case, then if...

"If I were in your position, I think I would be happy with that. Sure, I don't know if she knew how you felt, but I don't think someone who didn't care about you at all would do anything for you, let alone give you something like this. Even I can see that."

"So you don't want to play 'emotional catch' with the person you love?"

"Huh? I dunno actually. I guess the thought does make my heart flutter, but..."

"I've always felt that romantic love was a desire to have a relationship with someone and trying to progress toward that goal, but I guess that isn't the case for you?"

"Hmm... Yeah, I think so..."

I'd never really thought about it very much, but what kind of relationship *did* I want with Tanimoto? I'd be happy enough if she just agreed to go out with me. My imagination almost immediately started to get away from me—I imagined getting too excited on a date with her that I had to go to the bathroom to calm myself down, but then she would get the wrong idea and think I had stomach problems, so I'd come up with some crazy excuse about how sometimes I just like visiting bathrooms I've never been in before and—

What would even come after that? *Would* there be an after that?

If on the off chance we did start dating, I'd be incredibly happy. I'd want to walk down the street holding hands. But if Richard is to be believed, that happiness, like a sudden burst of action, couldn't go on forever. What would I want to come after that? A fight or something? That's right, Mr. Homura is getting married soon. Tanimoto had mentioned that she liked the idea of getting married because it'd mean she wouldn't have to deal with romance. I don't think that marriage has to be the conclusion of every romance, but it's certainly one conclusion. So, I guess I'd want to get married, build a home, and then—hm.

Build a home and then—hm?

Hm. I wasn't sure where it went from there, so I decided to stop thinking about it for the moment. I thought I saw Richard frowning at me out of the corner of my eye, but it was okay. I hadn't lost the plot. I knew that the most important thing right now wasn't my love problems but Mr. Otomura's cameo.

"You know, I really don't know, so I'll make that my homework. Getting back to the topic at hand, what did *you* want to happen, Mr. Otomura? And I don't mean how you envisioned your life together but what you wanted to happen to her."

Mr. Otomura hesitated. It was an awful question for me to ask. He was completely at a loss for words. I mean, obviously, he wanted her to live, right? But that's not what I'd meant. I was talking about feelings. I started to panic, but Mr. Otomura seemed to understand what I wanted to say.

"...I wanted her to be happy. I wanted her to always be happy."

"Then, um, I think you succeeded, Mr. Otomura. I think you massively succeeded."

"Huh? Y-you really think so?"

"I mean, you couldn't go home both out of concern for your family's reputation and your stepmother, right?"

"...But I wanted to tell her I loved her."

"But you didn't because you knew that doing so would throw her life into disarray, right? I think that takes a lot more strength, personally. Sure, you could have just spilled your guts on the spot—like some kind of reflex action—but doing the opposite and holding it in, that's really painful, right?"

Mr. Otomura laughed. He laughed for a bit like I'd just told a joke, before letting out a sigh, wiping his eyes, and retrieving the cameo from me. He looked at the beautiful lady's profile with teary eyes.

"I've never heard someone offer such praise for inaction. You have a talent for compliments, young man."

"Aw, you know I don't think that's really a talent!

“Right?” I added, looking back at Richard, but he cast his eyes down and drank his tea. Why was he ignoring me? Well, I guess no matter how friendly he might be with the client, it wasn’t his style to disparage one of his employees in front of a customer. I was grateful for his silence.

“...I wanted her to be happy. That much is true. But I also wanted to paint myself into the image of her happiness. You know, perhaps you are right. Maybe it really is just an issue of my own emotional fulfillment.”

“Are you sure that isn’t exactly what happened after all?”

Mr. Otomura and I turned to my boss in unison. What was Richard talking about?

“May I?” he said and picked the cameo up again. Richard gently set it down on top of the jewelry box and turned it toward Mr. Otomura.

“The decoration surrounding the cameo is clearly much newer than the cameo itself. Now, this is just my conjecture, but I believe only the cameo itself was the gift from her husband, and this frame was added later.”

“...But it fits the piece so perfectly.”

“You can tell great pains were taken to match the style of the original, but I would be hard-pressed to say that the workmanship perfectly matched the quality of the original. The quartz ornamentation and the cameo itself were clearly produced by different people. It seems likely that the person who ordered the original cameo and the person who ordered this addition likely did not have equal financial means either. Or perhaps the resource they were short on was time.”

Mr. Otomura’s face went pale as the figure on the cameo as he leaned forward, gripped by the topic.

“...Aren’t these rose leaves? I’ve heard that adding leaves instead of petals can signify a romantic rejection.”

“Roses can signify a fruitful romance, but I don’t think either interpretation has much to do with this particular motif. After all, these are quite clearly not rose leaves.”

Once Richard had us waiting for his next words with baited breath, he continued.

“This is a crown of laurels. Are you familiar with the term ‘poet laureate,’ Mr. Otomura? In ancient Greece, crowns of laurels were used to honor the greatest of poets. It’s a motif often used to celebrate artists.”

“Poet laureate? Does that... I mean, I am familiar with the term,” Mr. Otomura murmured.

I sure wasn’t though. I had the self-restraint to realize it wasn’t the right moment to ask what it was, but Richard looked an image up on his phone and handed it to me. It looked like a picture of a Greek or Roman—an old man in long white robes carrying a lyre with a crown of golden leaves on his head. I get it now. I guess the crown was awarded to the person who got first place in a poetry contest. I understood why it was called a “laureate” now, too—you know, because *laurel*.

“A noble lady, a rose, and a crown of laurels. From a critic’s standpoint, the motifs seem a bit jumbled, don’t you agree? However, ever since 19th-century England’s love affair with cameos, they began to serve not only as adornment but almost like letters. I think the message imbued in a natural stone carved by human hands into a piece of jewelry is an indispensable element of the piece’s beauty as well.”

A message to Kei Otomura from his stepmother.

He was a painter. Painting was his whole purpose in life. His work didn’t seem to sell particularly well, but he still loved to paint. And surely she knew that, too.

“I think the important thing is not whether she loved you as a child or otherwise, but that she undoubtedly loved the world you cherished.”

The world.

It was strange. I felt like suddenly I could see it all from a great distance. Maybe the person Mr. Otomura loved so dearly wasn’t looking his way, but she was looking at the world he painted. And she loved that world. And as a symbol of that, she took something her husband gave her and wrapped it in laurels and

gave it to him.

It almost reminded me of a special treasure a goddess in an RPG might give to the hero.

Mr. Otomura groaned. Was he going to be all right? Maybe I should have served him water instead of tea. I crouched down next to him and asked if he was okay. He let out a bitter chuckle.

“I finally understand what the worst part of it all was. It wasn’t that I never told her I loved her. And it wasn’t that I couldn’t be either her son or her romantic partner. It was the fact that no matter how hard I tried, there was nothing I could do to make her happy. It hurt to face the fact that I was nothing to her. You were right, Seigi. It really is all about your own emotional fulfillment. It was so simple, too. I mean...”

Mr. Otomura repeated that last bit several times. “I mean...she had this made for me because she didn’t care about any of that.”

He let out a sigh, the loudest sound he’d made since he came into the shop, and looked at Richard. My beautiful boss was sipping his tea with a calm expression on his face.

“What am I to do? I was prepared to leave the shop with an even more tragic expression on my face, but it doesn’t seem like that’s going to happen now. When I’m confronted with the foolishness of the airs I was putting on, and how I was so wrapped up in myself, I can’t think of anything else to do but drown my sorrows in food. I just realized it’s been ages since I had a good meal...”

“The sushi place next door has a delicious grilled tuna bowl.”

“Seigi.”

I felt like I hadn’t heard him scold me like that in ages. I apologized and bowed my head, but Mr. Otomura knit his brows and shook his head as he looked at me.

“A grilled tuna bowl, huh...sounds nice. I guess feeling hungry is proof that you’re still alive. I have to admit, it feels like a bit of a waste to have come all the way to Étranger only to be compelled to leave to satisfy my baser needs. I know you went to great pains to find all these cameos for me, but I won’t be

buying any of them. I'm sorry, Richard. I'll be in again sometime as usual."

"I am terribly sorry they were unable to meet your expectations."

Richard bowed with a smile. To me, he almost looked like a proud lead actor giving a bow after a show.

"...That was a little spooky, huh?"

"Indeed."

As I understood it, there were a lot of people who end up feeling suicidal when they lose a family member because they just can't bear the pain. I hadn't just looked it up because I was curious—my mother, Hiromi, suffered from what I guess was depression for a long time after my grandmother, her only living relative other than me, passed away. I happened to come across that factoid when I was trying to figure out what I, her only child, could do to help her. As a mere high school student at the time, it made me panic to read that. I worried that the situation might be a lot more serious than just making sure she got enough to eat. But there was no miraculous show of Son Power to give Hiromi Super Therapy and recover overnight—the one and only thing I could really do for her was leave her be. Many books mentioned that being too aggressive could have the opposite effect, so after a lot of serious thought, I decided that doing nothing was the better option.

And so, I beat it into my head that I needed to do my best not to cause Hiromi trouble. As a result, I became a model student who spent all his time studying in the school library. It wasn't easy for me, either. To be honest, part of me wanted to lash out at her, too, but my fear of Hiromi dying was much stronger. I clashed with her a few times when I couldn't hold it in anymore, but ultimately, my patience was rewarded and she pulled through it.

I just wanted my mother to be well. I'd feel that way even if she were my stepmother, or even if I was in love with her. Well...I guess I might feel even more strongly about it, in that case.

Richard asked me for more tea without saying a word.

"Roger that. Oh, you know, when I hear you talk, it puts me completely at ease."

“Is that so? I would also like something sweet with my tea. Specifically, that matcha Swiss roll you procured yesterday.”

“Oh, the one with the adzuki beans in it? Let’s eat up. Just a sec,” I said as I left for the kitchen.

I topped up our teas, plated the cake, and returned to the lounge, where I was greeted by a certain beautiful jeweler with a smile and a bow.

“Um, can I just say one thing?”

“Go right ahead. Be it a thing *or two*,” my very handsome boss said. I was grateful. But one would be more than enough.

“If you ever feel like dying again, call me. And if you don’t feel like talking on the phone, send me a letter or something with your address at least. Whether you’re in Kobe or Hokkaido or square on the other side of the planet, I’ll rush to your side to listen to whatever you have to say.”

About three seconds after I finished talking, my brain just froze. I was pretty sure what I was trying to say got through, but who did I think I was saying it *like that*? Even I wanted to ask myself what the hell that was. I wanted a do-over. That wasn’t how it was supposed to come out. It really didn’t sound like he was lying when he was talking to Mr. Otomura earlier, and that made me worry about him. All I wanted to do was ask him if he was okay and tell him I was concerned about him. How did that turn into this?

But before I could ask to pretend this was a TV set and to let me do a retake, Richard replied,

“I will.”

“Huh?”

“As I said, I will. Or was everything you just said a lie?” Richard asked.

“N-no, of course not, I wasn’t, I—” I mumbled awkwardly.

“Thought so,” the jeweler replied with a nod. “Now, I can assure you I was not lying about what I said earlier; however, I am simply far too busy to devote any amount of time to wallowing in thoughts of flirting with death. You have nothing to worry about.”

He really was beautiful when he was eating cake. Richard used the silver fork he was holding to neatly split the slice of matcha Swiss roll into quarters—it almost made it look like a four-leaf clover. I could see hints of reddish-brown from the adzuki beans here and there.

“Don’t worry, I’m not about to die or disappear.”

“...I’m happy to hear that, of course, but it’s a little scary how decisively you can assert that.”

“Why is that? I would never see you again if either of those things were to happen. And I wouldn’t care for that very much,” Richard said, bringing a quarter of the cake slice to his mouth. He savored every bite. He took a sip of his tea and swallowed, closing his eyes for just a moment longer than a blink. His blond lashes cast shadows on his pale skin.

His blue eyes looked at me as if to ask if I wanted something, but the color of his eyes was so incredibly rich in that moment that I completely forgot what I wanted to say.

“English.”

“Huh?”

“I worry that you might end up abandoning your language studies halfway. I can tell that you have a near perfect grasp of the grammar in your head, but when you try to verbalize the language, your articles and tenses become all jumbled. Criticizing your schooling’s excessive focus on reading and writing wouldn’t be terribly productive, but since you are under my tutelage now, I would bring shame to my alma mater if I didn’t ensure that your form improved a bit more.”

“Oh, good point. Thanks, I appreciate it.”

When I thanked him, he replied, “You’re quite welcome,” in a cool voice. The tea was delicious, but for some reason, I struggled to grasp the flavor. And I was sweating for some reason. Richard, meanwhile, had his usual calm, collected face on.

“Am I just imagining it or have you...changed a little recently?”

“Have I now? Changed in what way?”

“It’s hard to describe... I guess you’re just kinda...”

My hands kept moving up and down almost like someone working on a potter’s wheel. I couldn’t point to exactly what it was, but something felt different. Ever since he came back from England, I just felt like there was *something* different about Richard compared to how he was before. There was just something *different* about him when he was with customers, when he wasn’t, when we were talking on the phone, and in just ordinary moments, too.

As I continued moving my mouth, struggling to describe just what it was, Richard fluttered his eyelids and gently cocked his head to the side.

“I can’t say I have the faintest idea as to what you’re talking about.”

“I figured. Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. More importantly, don’t give up. I’m rooting for you.”

“I know. I’ve been thinking about taking an English certification exam. I’ll have to work my butt off.”

“I didn’t mean just that.”

I lifted my head to see Richard’s clear blue eyes staring at me again. What was it about them? They were so blue, they were like magical springs or something. Like the kind of place a goddess might lie in wait to appear and answer your prayers.

“I’m looking forward to finally meeting your lovely girlfriend. Would you like to bring her to the shop?”

“...You mean Tanimoto? Are you serious?”

“Of course I am.”

My eyes went wide as I looked at Richard. I *did* want to bring her here, if he’d allow it—but was it really okay?

Normally, this was when Richard would get frustrated and sigh, leading to our usual back and forth. But my beautiful boss didn’t take the baton from me this time. I cocked my head to the side, and the impossibly handsome man shook

his head slightly.

“I believe I told you before—right here in fact—that it wasn’t a good idea to turn your back on your desires.”

“Oh, you mean Machiavelli’s thing about how you should regret doing something, not *not* doing something.”

“This is just embarrassing. It’s like you heard something completely different. Whether you do something or not, you may have regrets either way. The point is that in hindsight, failing to do something you wish you had will result in suffering that regret for much longer. The nuance is important.”

“That sounds like basically the same thing to me.”

“I guess you could say that,” Richard said with a strained chuckle, before continuing with something baffling, “However, perhaps the real issue for you right now isn’t whether or not to take action, but for you to take a long, hard look at yourself and reflect on what you should be doing.”

Take a long, hard look at myself and reflect? Gimme a break! They were already making me do that at school with all these self-assessments and aptitude tests and stuff. I said as much to Richard. I caught a flash of grief in his eyes, and he abruptly dropped the subject.

“I see this may not be the best time for it, then. Why don’t we plan to go out to eat sometime soon? We can have a chat then.”

“Sounds good to me. I know, why don’t we get ramen? I know a great place.”

“I would happily go anywhere with you, but perhaps a place more conducive to conversation might be preferable.”

“Oh, yeah, ramen shops can be pretty loud, can’t they?”

Huh. There it was again. There was something ever so slightly off here—a bizarre sensation, like someone threw a single wild curveball while you were playing catch, but the game just kept going like normal. It was hard to pinpoint what was odd about it, but I just couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off.

“Hey...there really is something slightly different about you, isn’t there?”

“Perhaps?”

“Sorry, I’m going in circles. Just ignore me.”

If he wasn’t even aware of it himself, continuing to prod him about it was just in poor taste, right? I went to collect Richard’s plate to clean up, and he said under his breath, “If you really think it’s only ‘a little’ or ‘slight,’ then you really are blind.”

“What?” I couldn’t really hear what he said because the plate clinked just as he spoke.

“Nothing,” Richard replied.

Obviously, he had just said *something*. I tried pressing him on it, but he just dodged the question. I had to give up. I was sure he’d just get frustrated with me if I said I was sure something had changed again.

About two weeks later, Mr. Otomura came back to the shop, his arms heaped high with gift boxes of seasonal summer treats. He said, with a slightly embarrassed look on his face, that he came to apologize and thank us for what we did for him last time. And he gave us a flyer for his upcoming solo exhibition. He’d never done that before.

After he invited us to come, he put in an order with Richard for, “a piece fit for a poet laureate.” Preferably made of quartz of some sort. Richard, who’d been prepared, presented him with a variety of onyx and sardonyx pieces. Mr. Otomura bought an onyx hat pin. It was a gleaming black brooch that at first glance looked like it had a bow and arrow motif on it, but upon closer inspection, it was a palette and paintbrush. Very on-brand for Mr. Otomura. A stylish hat definitely suited him more than a necktie, too.

He said something strange to me as I walked him out that day.

“I know you’re going to think I’m crazy for even asking this, but I have to know—are you and Richard dating?”

“What?”

My eyes went wide as saucers, and Mr. Otomura said, deflated, “I thought

so,” before restoring his usual smile. What on Earth? I mean, yes, circumstances had compelled me to pretend to be his fiancé, but our actual relationship hadn’t changed—we were still just boss and employee.

“...Thank you Seigi, my friend. I think I needed that.”

“I don’t really understand. Why? I didn’t even do anything. You’re scaring me.”

“I guess you didn’t,” he laughed and turned to me.

I don’t think I’d ever spoken to someone so direct and honest before. I hadn’t noticed when I was serving him tea at *Étranger*, but when he stood up straight, he was really tall.

“They say that middle-aged married couples are less romantic partners and more comrades in arms—I think long-standing friendships and romances are kind of hard to distinguish from one another, don’t you agree? I know these are all just my assumptions, but when I first met you two, my impression was that you were a mysterious shop owner and his part-time assistant who was probably going to quit soon. But then I started thinking you two were good friends, and eventually, I guess I just assumed you were romantically involved.”

“What?!”

For some reason, I bowed my head as I explained that we always were and still are just boss and employee. I was grateful when Mr. Otomura seemed to accept that.

“The two of you have been doing a good job of maintaining that distance for a while now, huh? Interesting.”

“I-Is it? Isn’t that normal?”

“Yeah, I guess that could be a kind of normal. You know, there’s this idea that you lose sight of the essence of a thing if you focus too much on its form—it’s supposed to be the first thing you learn as an artist, but I always hated it. I hated tradition and tried to escape my family, but I guess I never understood any of it in the first place.”

“...I don’t think there’s anything particularly old fashioned about wanting

things to go well with the person you love.”

Mr. Otomura shot me a slightly scolding look and warned, “The tongue is the root of all calamity.”

I took that one to heart. Well, it was more like I’d had it repeatedly beaten into me for the last while now. But I was glad to see him acting more like himself again.

“You know, it’s strange. You’re supposed to be the cute but ignorant college student, but sometimes you seem much older and more world-weary than Richard.”

“D-do I? I don’t think I’ve ever had anyone say that about me before. Are you sure you’re not imagining things?”

“Maybe I am. Well, let’s hope I am.”

Mr. Otomura was definitely in a much better mood than he had been the last time he was here. It put my mind at ease.

He said goodbye with a smile on his face and turned to leave.

In that moment, my mind overlaid the face of the beautiful woman in the sardonyx cameo over his profile. Gentle and graceful, looking at the rose as if having something to say—but never uttering a word.

I guess love was like that sometimes.

Actually, was that the kind of love I wanted?

You were powerless to do anything in the face of the feeling called love. And the memories of “love” that had ended still pricked your heart from time to time. Just like my memories of my grandma, whom I’d never see again. I wondered...if I graduated leaving things the way they were, would my feelings for Tanimoto turn into the same sort of thing?

I didn’t want that. I didn’t want a love like that. It’s not like I had to worry about keeping up appearances or like there was anything standing in the way of the relationship. The only person standing in my way when it came to romance was *me*.

The third year of college was a time of change. So I decided to push myself

out of my comfort zone a little.

I got in touch with Tanimoto again for the first time in a while early the following week. I was busy with my job hunt, and she was busy with teaching practice. Tanimoto showed up in front of the library during lunch wearing jeans and a blouse. She smiled happily when she saw me, and I was so happy to see her I started crying.

“What’s wrong?”

“Um, uh, um, so, um...”

I’m pretty sure I said that another twenty times or so, but she just waited patiently. We didn’t exactly have the kind of relationship where we were comfortable completely dropping our guard around each other, but over the past year I’d gotten comfortable enough to know that even if I made a bit of an idiot out of myself in front of her like this, it’d probably be okay. She was an angel, after all.

“...W-w-would you like to come visit the shop in Ginza?!”

I added, awkwardly, that we were open on weekends and that I could make an appointment.

I had practically shouted it, rapid fire, and Tanimoto was a bit dazed for a moment.

“Are you sure? I don’t think I could, um, afford the kind of jewelry they sell in Ginza...”

“That’s totally fine! Our last customer was a regular who never buys anything!”

“You have people like that? You must see all sorts of people there.”

I told her that when my boss got back from England, I’d narrated the whole story to him—including how she had encouraged me to set out after him. And then—this wasn’t technically a lie, though we had actually talked about it before—he suggested I invite her to the shop.

She gave me a knowing smile. It was just for a second, but I felt like I saw a

flash of the debonaire Golgo Tanimoto. Maybe I just imagined it.

“Tanimoto? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing. I guess I feel a little less intimidated knowing that’s the situation.”

“Wh-what does that mean?”

“You’ll see soon enough. But if it’s really okay for me to come visit and just hang out, then I’m really excited. I never thought I’d ever find myself in a Ginza jewelry shop in my life. When you settle on a day that’s good for you, let me know.”

And then she told me that she had back-to-back practice classes after summer break, so she probably wouldn’t have a lot of opportunities to visit. That was close. This was basically my last chance. I immediately sent a text to the typically quick-to-respond Emperor of Sweets to ask about making an appointment, and he replied “any day is fine,” almost immediately. I couldn’t thank him enough.

And so, for the first time in my entire life—even if it took an absurdly long time—I succeeded in inviting Tanimoto out for something other than lunch. I was pretty sure it was debatable whether this counted as a date or not, but that all came down to how motivated the person extending the invitation was, right?

That night, I sent the living god, Richard, a text saying, “Thank you. Thank you so much.” In a strange turn of events, Richard replied with an emoji. A smiley face. No words.

As I stared at the smiling face on my screen, I felt for the first time like I understood one of the reasons women’s profiles were such a popular design for cameos. People smiled in all sorts of situations, but if you looked at a smiling face for too long, it got kind of unsettling, because you could read anything into it. *No, come on, obviously he was just busy today. I should be grateful he replied at all.*

I wondered how Mr. Otomura was doing. The roses were beautiful at the end of spring. I wondered if he was going out somewhere in the cheery sunlight,

wearing that hat of his. I hoped he was. Surely, he would look beautiful like that. Just the thought of it put me in a good mood.

But ultimately, those were just my feelings on the subject.

c a s e

3

The Majesty
of Zircon



I THINK IT MIGHT BE BEST for me to just be frank about the current situation:

It was bad. My job search was going real bad.

It was the end of April. My friends from the exam prep course, who were all on the hunt for jobs, and I were starting to focus on our self-assessments. I always figured looking for a job was all about filling out applications—you know, selling yourself on job search websites and stuff. But apparently, first came the important step of doing these self-assessments, which were personality tests that would tell you what kind of work you were best suited to and give you a basis for your career search. It kind of made me think of going clothes shopping with a friend and having them tell you what looks good on you. Not that I'd ever done anything so fashionable.

However.

The class included both people who were dead set on passing the civil service exam and people intending to go into the private sector. When I first joined, I was pretty intent on a government job. But when I expressed that intention, pretty much everyone in the circle of folding chairs looked a little confused. "Weren't you going into the commercial industry, Nakata? I think you're better suited to that."

I hadn't even asked, but they just kept going about how I wasn't cut out for civil service. I explained that they must have gotten the wrong idea—I wanted to work at the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare on policies to reduce poverty—but there was just this vibe in the room, like it was totally out of the question. It didn't make any sense, so I tried asking them why.

"I mean, Nakata, you don't seem like you could handle following rules and regulations to the letter."

"Huh?"

"You think you'd be happy being a government paper-pusher? Come on, don't kid yourself."

"Wait, what?"

"Plus, let's be real, Seigi—you're a meddler. It might work in your favor in the

service industry, but the kind of work you're talking about has strictly defined roles. I don't think I'm the only one here who thinks it would just hurt you."

"I agree. I think you're a better fit for the private sector. Maybe an NGO or something like that?"

"Wait, what? Huh?"

I couldn't even say anything in response. And that was how the first step of my self-assessment started—with the fact that I apparently didn't know the first thing about myself being shoved in my face.

That was a very depressing Friday. I went home looking hollow-eyed as a dead fish and made some pudding—getting a smile out of Richard on Saturday would help me recover. Thank you, you beautiful jeweler, you. He probably had no idea how much the look of sheer joy he got when he was enjoying something sweet could restore me.

But my classmates weren't wrong. My whole thing about wanting to work on policies to help reduce poverty was just a pretext—the real reason I wanted to go into civil service was because it was a stable career. The Ministry of Health, Labor, Welfare, the National Tax Agency, or even some regional government office—I didn't care. You'd never have to worry about being fired unless you committed some serious misconduct, and you were basically assured your employer would go under.

And considering the rigor of the qualifying tests, the salary was pretty good. My mother, Hiromi, had me when she was 35. My step-father was still in Indonesia at the time, training people on oil rigs. I'd been nothing but trouble to her. Once I graduated, it would be my turn to help her. If I couldn't, what was even the point of Hiromi sending me to college in the first place? I'd heard raising a kid described as an investment before, so I'd basically be defaulting on my loan if I couldn't pay back what she invested in me. And I wasn't about to let that happen.

But the thing is, the civil service exam had two parts. Even if you passed the first phase—the written test—there was a second interview phase to weed out people who didn't seem like a good fit. One instructor, who'd seen a number of students focused so intently on the civil service exam that they took a year after

graduation just to try to pass, graciously advised us that it'd be in our best interest to apply to some private sector companies, too.

I got it. I'll try my best.

And that was why I picked the relatively difficult path of pursuing private sector jobs while I studied for the civil service exam. I could clearly see what I needed to do. My next steps would be as followed: go to company information sessions while studying the constitution; fill out application forms while learning the penal code, labor law, and international law; think about interview tactics while studying economics and public finance. I was pretty sure I was going to die.

Getting an internship at a private company would be tough. The hardcore types were obviously going to exam prep classes, while even the more self-study focused people were taking correspondence courses. This wasn't my first rodeo, though. I thought back to my college entrance exams—everyone said I'd never make it into Kasaba, but I did. And I could do it again. I had exam questions from past years that I could use to study, and the exam didn't cost anything this time, either.

But even with all that, I was never going to be ready in time if I didn't study on weekends.

I imagined myself in the library on the weekend, drilling past years' exam questions. I considered asking Richard if he'd let me bring my textbooks to Étranger to study but refrained. Did I really intend to spread all those massive textbooks out on the shop's one and only table? That was a little too brazen, even for me.

The guys in my prep class were always pointing out how I had a bad habit of blurring the line between public and private matters. I mean, I was going to quit after next year. Maybe I'd be better off getting fired before that?

But at the same time, I couldn't stop thinking about what Shimomura had said to me about priorities.

I was pretty sure he wouldn't get mad at me for calling once in a while, since Professor Richard was giving me English lessons now. Maybe he'd even let me make him dessert from time to time, so I could watch him tap his foot in delight

as he ate. That would really revitalize me.

The more I thought about it, the more I was confronted with the question of just what Richard even *was* to me. Was he just a way to recharge my emotional batteries?

The sound of fingers tapping against a keyboard echoed through Étranger's lounge. Richard wasn't running the shop today—the reins had been handed over to Saul.

Saul, a short-statured gentleman with rich brown skin and a black mustache, was a jeweler headquartered in Sri Lanka and manager of Ranasinghe Jewelry, a shop with locations in three countries. He was also Richard's mentor. He wasn't as proactive about communicating with me as Richard was, generally spending his customer-free time banging out emails in English on his white laptop. He always seemed busy.

Speaking of Richard—he was out of the shop today because he was making a house call to show gems to a customer in their own home. From what Saul had said, that was what he spent most of his time doing Monday through Friday. I felt like I should probably start praying at his altar, considering he somehow found time to teach me English on top of all that.

“.....”

I looked up and caught a glimpse of the Sri Lankan man's face in profile. We had just gotten a cancellation call, so our next customer wasn't due until two. Saul told me I could leave for a bit if I wanted, but I knew if I did that, I'd just be agonizing over the blanks in my personal history for my self-assessment. I wolfed down the sandwich I had bought at the convenience store and continued my work at Étranger. I was even starting to enjoy drinking his miraculously spiced tea.

The shop was so quiet.

I took a deep breath and let out a long sigh. Saul chuckled.

“It looks like something's been bothering you. Are you quite all right?”

“Sorry, I’m fine. I’ve been preparing to go job-hunting and it’s just been a lot.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it? When you say it’s ‘a lot,’ do you mean there are so many careers you’re interested in that you’re struggling to pick?”

I explained that it was the opposite—I wasn’t sure there were any jobs that would want me, and Saul laughed heartily. Whenever I heard him laugh, I couldn’t help but imagine a malevolent Sri Lankan deity.

“You don’t think they would want you? What’s that supposed to mean? Are you treating this job hunt less like the first step in a career and more like a once-in-a-lifetime date with your destined partner?”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

I explained to Saul that in present-day Japan, being a new college graduate was pretty much a requirement for most jobs, so I had to present myself in the best light at the right time to have a chance. And that even though job openings were on the rise, a lot of those openings were from exploitative companies or companies on the verge of bankruptcy—basically, traps—so it wasn’t all that easy to find a job these days. Richard probably knew all this, but I wasn’t as familiar with Saul, so I opted to be thorough.

Saul said, “I see,” in English. He looked at my face as if he was searching for something. “So this job-hunt is like a race all college students of a particular age are forced to participate in, huh? What happens if you drop out of the race?”

“You mean like burning out? I think it’d be easier to recover right now than if we were in a recession, but it’d still be rough.”

It went without saying that there was this feeling of tension about the whole thing—no failure allowed.

I thought back to my friend Hase, who had unexpectedly walked into *Étranger* one day. If he hadn’t struggled so much to find work, he probably wouldn’t have ended up like that. Thinking of him still made me feel like a black hole had opened up in my stomach. But whenever that happened, I’d just think about Richard and it’d put me in a better mood.

“Anyway, you see, I don’t really have a choice, so I’m going to approach it as if I were Richard.”

“As if you were Richard? You mean like you’re a white man?”

“No, no!”

I explained that I meant I was going to approach it like I was just as talented and accomplished as him. Like if I was Richard on the inside. Even if you took away the physical beauty, you’d still be left with an incredibly capable person. He could speak over ten languages, held an international driver’s license, and gemology certifications. He was always dressed immaculately and knew how to be kind to people without overdoing it. He was exacting in his standards because he had absolute confidence in his work. Even the most stubborn of hiring managers would want someone like him on their team.

I said as much, and Saul laughed, mustache bouncing with each chuckle. He looked me in the eye without changing his expression. What did he want?

“Mr. Nakata, I think I’m going to take a little break. I would like some more tea, and perhaps a snack to accompany it.”

“Oh, sure. I’ll go see what we have. Maybe we still have some red bean jelly left.”

Red bean jelly was Saul’s favorite. He was especially fond of the muscovado sugar flavor made by this one traditional Japanese confectionery shop on the same street as Shiseido Parlor, though he always paired it with his spiced tea instead of green tea. I tried it with him once and was surprised at how well they went together. Probably the latent potential of traditional Japanese confections.

I sliced up the block of red bean jelly. Saul asked me to prep another serving, so I cut the six thick slices in half and split them between two plates. I guess he was telling me to join him on his break.

Saul set his laptop off to the side on the table, eliminating the barrier between us. Unlike Richard, who typically waited for the person he was with to make a move, Saul tended to take the initiative to close the distance on his own terms. His timing was usually about perfect, and conversation would start to flow naturally. He may have been a bit more aggressive than Richard, but he was a master of socializing, too.

“Mr. Nakata, you still love Richard, correct?”

I nearly spit out my tea. Saul still had a habit of dropping bombs without warning—as I’d had plenty of chances to experience that last winter. I honestly—maybe a little *too* honestly—told him I did, yes, and he laughed again. I cocked my head to the side and mentioned that I wished I had an older brother like him. Saul laughed again.

“I take it you don’t have any siblings?”

“I don’t. Why do you ask?”

“Affection demands compensation. When people realize they’ve focused their love on someone who didn’t deserve it, the disappointment comes as a quantifiable loss. What do you think about that?”

I could kind of see where the conversation was going. He had mentored Richard, and as a result, he knew all of his pupil’s faults. I probably looked ridiculous to him. But still.

“...I don’t think so, really. I don’t think his massive sweet tooth and other stuff like that are flaws, they’re just part of his personality. If you’re asking me about compensation, I think I’ve received more than enough.”

“Good God, I think I’m starting to understand how my idiot pupil feels.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’ll understand soon enough. Now, I would like to take advantage of this break to have an extended conversation in Japanese. My recent clients have needed English, more English, and occasionally some Arabic, so I’m not concerned about my proficiency with the language, but I do quite enjoy Japanese. Would you indulge me in conversation for a bit?”

“Sure, but what do you wanna talk about?”

Saul flashed me his genie-like smile again and gracefully crossed his legs. He wore shiny black leather shoes with navy socks that matched his shirt. He preferred much darker and more vivid colors than Richard did.

“It was nearly five years ago now. Odd to think I’ve known him that long.”

It sounded like he was talking about when he met Richard. I reflexively

furrowed my brow. I'd heard a little bit about what he was doing back then—like he hadn't been on his best behavior. I wasn't afraid I'd have my illusions about him shattered or anything like that, but I did have mixed feelings about talking about this when he wasn't around.

I was about to collect the rest of the red bean jelly, when Saul stopped me and looked me straight in the eye.

“Don't worry, I am his mentor, remember?”

He smiled his devilish smile directly in front of my face. If Richard's face was overwhelming beauty, Saul's was probably closer to abject terror. What did being his mentor have to do with anything? Should I take that to mean that he wouldn't do anything to hurt his pupil.

I responded with a gaze that said, “I trust you.” Saul smiled cheerfully and began talking again.

“Now, I'm not sure if you're aware, but the climate in Sri Lanka varies a bit between the northern and southern parts of the country. He and I met in a mountain town in the south during one of our short springs. A sun shower—an unusual occurrence for the region—hung over the town the day we met.”

As he spoke, Saul snapped his right hand open in midair to punctuate.

Rain fell without a sound in the indistinct period between morning and afternoon.

There was nothing in the apartment but a bed, a refrigerator, a desk, a single chair, and a beaten-up sofa. The ceiling fan lazily circulated the humid air. There was no AC. The room's occupant didn't even attempt to move. He just lay in bed, wrapped in his white sheets, back turned to the sunlight streaming through the window. Outside the window, the wind rustled through the leaves of succulents with white flowers against a backdrop of a flowing river.

The silence seemed like it could go on forever. Just as the room's occupant let out a belabored sigh, the door suddenly opened and a roar of noise forced its way in.

“Hello, it’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Saul, and I happen to own this building. The woman on the first floor who lent you this room is one of my employees. As you can see, I have a duplicate key.”

The occupant of the bed opened his eyes and looked over at the intruder, a suited man with the same dark skin and facial features of the majority of the people who lived in this island nation.

“You’re trespassing...”

“Oh, I can assure you, I would do no such thing. I am merely here to check on my property, as its landlord. Goodness, you’ve been living here for a month and you’re still doing this? Are you familiar with the phrase ‘living your life’? Oh, would you look at that, there’s something stuck under the sofa. Why don’t I take a look. Is this your passport?”

“Give that back!”

Saul crouched down, snapped up the hidden piece of identification, and retreated toward the door to inspect its contents. He grunted once he’d flipped through the passport, which bore the emblem of the United Kingdom, and raised an eyebrow, but showed no intention of returning it to where he’d found it.

“This room was rented to a one ‘Edward Baxter,’ which does not appear to be the name on your passport. You wouldn’t happen to have a twin brother, would you? You do have a distinctly British accent when you’re still half asleep, though.”

“...What do you want? Why are you here?”

The Sri Lankan gentleman’s expression turned belligerent. The blue-eyed man, who had been glaring at him the whole time, looked away and smiled ever so slightly.

“We’re not close enough in relationship for it to not bother me that you answered my question with another question, but I’ll let it slide this time. Mr. Baxter—or should I say, Mr. Claremont—I regret to inform you that I’ve come to return your ‘product’ to you.”

The man on the bed turned away from the other man as he put his hand into

his pocket. He froze, imagining that a beating or even a gun could be coming next, but almost disappointingly, no matter how long he waited, nothing of the sort hit him.

The man was holding a fancy cut blue stone.

“I sold that yesterday... Why do you have it?”

“They bought this thinking it was a topaz, but no, it’s blue zircon. I admittedly did not inform the German couple you sold this to of that fact.”

The dark-skinned man stepped closer to the man who was glaring at him and shoved the stone right under his nose.

“This is actually quite a nice stone, but it is not appropriate for people who trade in gems to misrepresent something the customer didn’t want and pressure them into buying it. It’s especially not something you should do to tourists visiting this glittering island. You’re the white jeweler who’s been peddling your wares in Colombo for the past month, aren’t you? My acquaintances saw it all. Suffice to say their impressions were nothing short of lousy—both of the gems you were selling and the people you were acquiring them from. Oh, yes, and it seems those gem dealers won’t be selling to you anymore. My deepest condolences.”

“.....”

“It’s abundantly clear that you don’t know a single soul here. And you seem to have no intention of changing that, either. It was bold of you to go into the trade under those circumstances. Or are you just looking for a diversion?”

“...Why do you have that?”

“That couple wanted a topaz. It’s my job to find them what they’re *actually* looking for and send it along. I am, after all, the real deal—a jeweler doing actual business here. By the way, why aren’t you dressed yet?”

The self-proclaimed “real deal” grabbed the bathrobe off the sofa and tossed it to his temporary tenant. The man staggered to his feet and stuck his arms through the sky-blue robe, asked if the other man was happy now, and was met with a hearty nod. He almost felt like he was being put on trial.

“What you’ve done in my town is both foolish and difficult to excuse.”

“Gem fraud is pretty common, as far as I’m aware.”

“Watch your tongue. You only make yourself look worse every time you open your mouth.”

The tenant fell silent as the landlord pressed him further with a smile.

“That said, you’ve got quite the silver tongue. That couple seemed pleased to have found a dealer here that could speak their native language. You wouldn’t be a hollow shell if you lost your dazzling good looks—a rare quality in a swindler.”

The man looked over his shoulder and glared at the intruder as he changed out of the robe and into afternoon attire.

“Don’t talk about my face. I find it displeasing.”

He seemed to know it wouldn’t be effective, but he shot the landlord a threatening glare. The landlord seemed to notice something and smiled.

“I see. You have some baggage in that department. Please, excuse my gaffe, Your Highness,” he said with a deep bow.

The man completely ignored the landlord’s little performance. Once he finished dressing himself in a worn-out shirt and slacks, he put on a pair of sandals and took a few necessities with him as he tried to leave the room—that is until he ran into a group of people just outside the door. The hall was packed with a sari-clad mother and her children. There were five children, one of them in the mother’s arms. Behind them was a large pile of baggage which looked to be all of the family’s possessions.

The landlord stepped out while the man stood there, bewildered by the situation.

“These are the new tenants. It seems to have slipped my mind earlier, but I’ll be lending this unit out to someone else starting tomorrow. If you have a problem with that, you only have yourself to blame for lying about your identity. How unfortunate for you.”

The man gritted his teeth and apologized to the mother and her children as

he pushed his way through their bags and down the stairs. The three older children, excited to see a man who looked like he could be a movie star, started following him—but when he completely ignored them, they headed back up to the second floor, disappointed.

The man began walking down the unpaved road as rain fell from the sky. He turned around when he heard someone call to him from behind—the shorter man was making his way down the stairs.

“There’s nothing that way but a river.”

“...I have an interest in waterside ecosystems.”

“Do you now? You don’t seem in much of a rush for a man on the run.”

The man opened his eyes wide in response, and the landlord sighed out of frustration.

“Are you wondering how I know that? If anything, the question you should be asking is why would a man whose only relation to you is that of your landlord going this far? I know someone’s after you. That’s why you’ve been hiding under a false name. But for some personal reason, you have neither the will to take any meaningful action nor an eye for gemstones. Did I hit the nail on the head?”

The man didn’t say another word, but ignored the landlord, and continued walking toward the river. He only got about ten steps before the landlord grabbed his arm and jerked him to a stop.

“Don’t touch me. I don’t like being touched.”

“You’re like an ill-tempered animal. Or like a deer who’s bound to be shot at any moment. Cool your head.”

“And whose fault do you think that is?! Do you want me to call the police?”

“I’d like to see you try.”

“.....”

“Your passport,” the landlord said in a singsong tone as he held the document up. The other man groped around his pockets before holding out a hand, demanding its return, but the landlord just smiled and held the passport even

higher, before gently returning it to the man's pale hand.

"You can have it back, but I also have a proposal for you: compensation for evicting you. Personally, I feel a bit awkward about the notion of taking your three months of advance rent and chasing you out of the country after one. I have other properties available. Let me show you around."

"I'm not sure why you think I would trust you under the circumstances."

"I wouldn't dream of asking you to. After all, you don't even trust yourself. What value would the trust of such a person have in the first place? None, nada."

The man's pale face grew even more pallid. The shorter man's severe expression softened.

"When was the last time you had a proper meal? And are you drinking enough water?"

"That's none of your business."

"Fine, suit yourself. But you're going to have to get down the mountain to make it to the tourist information booth in the shopping center if you want to find any other lodging in this area. The last bus going down the mountain left two hours ago. I wouldn't recommend trying to make the trek in those sandals. Do it barefoot—it's the latest fad here in Sri Lanka."

"....."

"What will you do? And what should I call you?"

"....."

"What should I call you?"

After a solid thirty seconds of wavering, the man muttered, "Richard," and the landlord's lips twisted into a smile.

"It's an excellent name, but you don't seem like much of a Lionheart right now. If anything, you remind me more of a certain Swiss lion."

The man frowned at the baffling comment, giving him a wordless look that said "you don't know me."

“Saul Ranasinghe. Pleased to meet you. By the way, that car parked over there belongs to me.”

Richard looked to where Saul was pointing and did a double take as he saw a midnight blue Aston Martin parked on the side of the sandy, one-lane mountain road. He could hardly believe his eyes.

“It didn’t work.”

A blond man in a suit slipped into a London café with a blue sign outside. The café was part of a chain that styled itself as Italian-influenced coffee houses, and it was furnished with comfortable seating.

The man took a seat on the sofa where someone was waiting for him. The person who had been waiting smiled and thanked him, but the new arrival responded to him not with a smile but with words—Japanese, specifically. The sight of these two blond-haired blue-eyed men speaking a language that was clearly not a Western one drew curious gazes from the employees.

“Good lord, I’ve never heard anything so stupid in my life. Our ancestors sure had some balls to use a flimsy piece of paper to make fools of their descendants.”

“What if my mother or I change our nationalities?”

“That wouldn’t work either. If you try anything clever like that, they’ll come back with a condition saying it’ll go to the National Trust. I’ve been going back and forth with them about what to do about it, but they just keep telling me they can only reveal these conditions in order. Honestly, they deserve a commendation for being so unreasonable.”

The issue the two men were struggling with was a family will. They were both related to an Earl, and this will had placed restrictions on whom any member of the family who met particular requirements could marry. Due to a twist of fate, these chains had turned out to bind not the Earl’s eldest son and heir but this other man, who was like a little brother to him.

The man just so happened to be considering getting married. If they couldn’t find a way around the terms of the will, this marriage could spell financial ruin

for the entire family. The current Earl and head of the family was of the opinion that he should forget about the will and marry the person he loved, but his eldest son's mental and physical condition had deteriorated under the stress of the situation. He had made a weekly habit of coming to this café to talk to the man in the suit as they ran about here and there, almost like some kind of special forces unit, racking their brains trying to figure out some way the marriage could go forward and appease all parties involved.

This particular meeting had an especially heavy gloom hanging over it.

The café fell silent except for the bossa nova track playing in the background. Eventually, the two men began to talk again.

"Now, this is just a thought, but how much jail time does an arson charge carry again? What if we burn the house down?"

"You're joking."

"I'm pretty sure diamonds turn into charcoal when they burn. Maybe we could use a temporary insanity defense."

"Please just stop. Why would we need to do that?" Unable to take it, the man turned away. But his suit-clad companion only smiled.

"I'm joking, obviously. I just can't take seeing you so upset. Cheer up, little prince, your big brother has a present for you."

"That was an awful nickname from school."

"But it suits you, why not embrace it?"

The man in the suit pulled a small bundle from his jacket pocket. The round confections were steamed buns in the shape of small birds. He traveled overseas often for training. Whenever he set foot in a certain island country, this was the gift he brought back with him.

"They're cute, aren't they? But I always feel so bad eating them. I find myself apologizing in my mind as I tear their cute little heads off. Makes me feel a bit like a monster."

"I've heard that Japanese folks feel similarly. Perhaps you're just as kind and sensitive as they are."

“I dunno about that. I hear that the Japanese are only ‘kind’ until they have to take responsibility for something. Like, people will say they’re sorry at the drop of a hat, but no one thinks they’re *actually* sorry about anything. Then again, maybe I’m like that, too.”

“I don’t think everyone is like that.”

He stowed the gift away in his bag with a smile. After an appropriate amount of polite small talk, he asked the older man about what was actually on his mind.

“...So how’s Harry been?”

The background music filled the café again before the men continued their conversation.

“He’s getting there. Well, that’s not really the right way to put it—that’s something you say when someone’s doing well. Maybe ‘not horrible’ or ‘it could be worse’ might be better? He’s been sleeping about twenty-three out of twenty-four hours in the day. He’s been losing weight as a result, and I’m worried.”

“I wish I could tell him to just not worry about it so much.”

“Yeah, I dunno. It’d probably be better not to say anything to him right now, to be honest.”

The three of them had been raised like brothers, but the eldest of them, Henry, had been doing poorly and was only getting worse by the day. The man had always thought of Henry as his older brother, but when Henry stopped letting him into his room, the ‘third son’ realized that perhaps Henry hadn’t felt the same way about him. The only person he would even talk to now was his biological younger brother.

“Has he said anything? Like is there anything he wants to eat or do?”

“Nope.”

“...I see.”

This change in Henry’s behavior was baffling to the man. Henry was always the most artistically inclined of the three, and that, combined with his strong

sense of duty, meant he had a tendency to take on too much alone and was frequently the first to buckle under that self-imposed pressure. Ever since he was young, the man had known Henry was acutely aware of the fact that the family would be his responsibility one day, so he had come to believe it was *his* job to support Henry in that task. He had noticed that Henry's biological brother often made very forced mistakes in areas where his older brother excelled to make sure Henry got the credit, but personally, he'd never considered Henry so weak as to require such treatment. The man respected Henry deeply for his knowledge of the art world.

The man in the suit was quiet for a while before commenting, "He did say one thing."

"What?"

"... 'I keep getting uglier and uglier,'" he said, mimicking a dark and gloomy tone.

The man frowned, struggling to understand what he meant by this concern for his physical appearance when he wasn't even going outside, but the man in the suit paid him no mind and continued to enjoy his drink.

"Well, I think it's about time the tide turned in our favor. Look forward to some good news next time. Or maybe 'pray for,' rather. I'm expecting a *very* flattering speech about me at your wedding reception. You know, thanking me for making your marriage possible."

"I'll be sure to introduce you as the most important person in my life."

"I think you should save that one for your bride. Well, bye for now, Ricky. I'll see you again soon."

"See you."

As the smiling man in the suit left, he felt his vision begin to blur. "Probably because I can't remember how I left the café," the dreamer mused absent-mindedly.

The man awoke and began rubbing his temples in an attempt to rouse himself

from his half-asleep state. The Aston Martin was parked on a steep road. If the handbrake broke, it would definitely roll all the way down.

In the middle of the mountain road was a gate and a white house beyond an expansive yard.

“We’re here. Get out.”

The house was a spacious wood construction single-family home. There were two wicker chairs and a table on the porch surrounded by a cobblestone path. The trees adorning the villa looked like fruit trees—banana and mango and the like. Amidst all the crumbling old stone buildings, the white walls that looked as if they’d been repainted several times over, along with the vivid green surroundings, almost looked like it could have been somewhere in the English countryside. A single red tropical flower was arranged neatly in a Chinese porcelain vase.

Richard got out of the passenger seat and followed Saul, albeit hesitantly, as he made his way to the house. He felt reasonably confident that even if several people were lying in wait to ambush him, given how open the area was, he’d be able to get away.

“Are there other tenants?”

“There is one.”

Saul rang the front doorbell. After a few moments, a woman appeared from inside. She was even shorter than Saul, and she wore sandals, showing off her red pedicure.

“Allow me to introduce you, Monica, this is Richard. Richard, this is Monica. She’s, um...oh, yes, she’s my...my daughter.”

“I can tell she’s not your daughter.”

The woman Saul had just introduced as Monica looked intently at the visitor without so much as a hello from inside her veil. A black veil covered her entire head. The design was different from the all-white Jain masks or the burqas that women in more strict denominations of Islam wore. This one had only a hole in the right side that she could see through.

Richard could see a hint of three braids running down her back. Her skin was a lighter brown than Saul's, and she wore a white shirt and a long navy skirt—it looked a bit like a school uniform.

The entryway, illuminated by sunlight from a skylight, was larger than it initially appeared. Even the tiled hallway connected to it was big enough that a small car could have probably fit inside. He could see something that looked like a kitchen further inside, and to the immediate left of the entryway was a white door with a large lock on it.

“Richard, your job is to be her bodyguard. You are to retrieve groceries once a day, ward off suspicious persons, exterminate insects, and whatever else needs attending to. I don't have a regular employee staffing this house. In exchange, you can stay here rent-free. I think it's a rather generous offer if I do say so myself.”

Richard looked over at Monica to see if she had understood what he said. She showed no reaction. Taking this to mean she hadn't understood him in the slightest, Richard glared at Saul.

“...You said you don't have any staff here, but if, for argument's sake, I accept that she's actually your daughter, I would hope you would refrain from leaving her alone with such a suspicious man.”

“I think that's a question you should be directing at your own self-respect rather than me. But even if you were to turn out to be even more of a bastard than I could possibly imagine, I'm not particularly concerned. I'll be delivering the groceries here once a day, and I do have someone to clean the bathrooms here—Ms. Shadi, she comes once in the morning and in the evening. If you set even one foot out of line, she would not hesitate to smear that beautiful face of yours with feces. If you are so desperate for an experience you'll never be able to forget, then please, be my guest.”

Before Richard could voice an objection, Saul continued in rapid fire.

“If there's anything else you need to know about the house, just ask Monica. I have only one warning for you: Don't try to get into the locked room. That's not a suggestion. All right, Monica, if anything happens, please contact me immediately.”

And with a “good day,” the jeweler disappeared with his Aston Martin. He didn’t even give Richard the opportunity to ask him if he really intended to let some foreigner he didn’t know the first thing about live here.

But that said, he didn’t exactly have anywhere else to go, so he decided to at least spend the night and head to the tourist information center the following day. That was when Richard noticed the eyes on him.

It was Monica, the girl—or at least he thought she was a girl—the person under the veil.

She didn’t try to get any closer. She just kept her distance and watched Richard. The cloth concealing her face made her expression impossible to read.

“I take it you understand English. Despite what he said, I don’t think I should really be staying here. If there’s somewhere nearby that I might be able to get out of the rain, I’d like to get some rest.”

Monica stared at Richard for a moment before gesturing for him to come into the house. All of the halls were wide, not just the entrance. It really didn’t look like a rental house so much as a resort that was closed before it ever opened. He followed her, peering into the empty guest rooms lining the hall. They went out a back door, through a gate, and followed a path through the back yard. There seemed to be an annex deep in the trees. Monica wordlessly pointed at the small building and then showed him the key for the gate they’d just come through.

“You’re saying I can stay there because you can keep me out?”

She nodded and Richard bowed deeply in response.

“Thank you, I will take you up on the offer. Do you know what time I’m to retrieve the groceries he mentioned?”

“Evening. Already have today’s, though. I’ll let you know when you’re up tomorrow.”

Her English had a heavy accent, but she spoke well. Richard smiled and withdrew toward the annex when Monica asked him to wait.

“I want to let you know now. Even if I try to hide it, I’m sure you’ll see it

sooner or later.”

Monica lifted her veil and Richard’s eyes went wide.

Her face was split right down the middle. The right half was cute, with normal eyes and a nose and a mouth, but the left half was covered in horrible burn scars. The space where her eye should have been was covered with gauze and tape. She had none of the features you’d normally expect from a face on that side.

Seeing Richard’s reaction, Monica remained expressionless as she brought the veil back down.

“You don’t need to worry about me, but I appreciate you being here. Bye.”

She waved to him, closed the back gate, and locked it behind her.

The house, that seemed like a mountain hideaway, was in fact not hidden in the slightest. Plenty of people lived in the neighborhood, and the moment the clock struck eight in the morning, a roar of Hindi music filled the area. Music that sounded like it could have easily accompanied the climax of a Bollywood movie continued day after day. It was just a fifteen minute ordeal every day, but he didn’t have the energy to shout at people on his way to the tourist information center. Even as Ms. Shadi, a skinny old woman with wrinkles and darker skin than Saul’s, murmured to herself wondering why Saul invited this strange man to stay there, she still meticulously cleaned the bathrooms of both the main house and the annex.

Being forced to wake up in the morning and go to bed at night began to wear on Richard, to the point that each morning when he was forced awake at 8 a.m. sharp, he would shove pillows against his ears and curse the world. Even if he wanted to just melt away into bed, Saul would inevitably come around in his Aston Martin in the evening to make Richard unload heavy bottles of water and dishes of locally made fish and deep-fried bread from the car, and check on how his “daughter” was doing.

The annex where Richard was staying was one large room, with only a half bath. But it had AC and a powerful fan and even a mosquito net. His life in Sri

Lanka was so comfortable, in fact, that his only cause for concern was the fact that there were only two pills left in the bottle of sleeping pills he'd been prescribed back in England. Richard had figured there would be a good chance he'd encounter trouble when he left home, but he had no idea what kind of demands this Saul guy might make of him. He knew that if he ended up in a situation he couldn't get out of on his own, and he had to go to the authorities as a last resort, they'd end up contacting his family.

His mind suddenly began to wonder what everyone back in England was doing at the moment, but he forced himself to think of something else when he felt a flashback coming on. He escaped one island to settle down on another after wandering around Europe for a bit, and as that bottle which had been his greatest source of comfort grew empty, it turned into another source of anxiety. He had no idea how to safely acquire more in Sri Lanka and couldn't be sure that the pharmacies in the area sold medication that was safe to use.

He went out into the yard and sat down in one of the wicker chairs in the gentle sunlight of the afternoon. He was beginning to feel a little better as he stared intently at the flood of green, not thinking of anything in particular, when that peace vanished as quickly as bubbles on the surface of a pond as soon as the question of what he was even doing there crossed his mind.

“.....”

As he stared out into the garden, Monica came out of the main house. She pushed her way through the tropical fruit trees and eventually made her way to Richard. She held out a black-and-white spine to him, almost like a small child might offer someone a flower. She whispered that she'd encountered a porcupine. Richard could vaguely picture what a porcupine looked like. He was pretty sure he'd seen an animal that looked like a large hedgehog at the zoo in Regent's Park, but the thought that something like that could be wandering around the grounds was hard to imagine.

“Aren't they dangerous?”

“It had cute eyes. But they're very sharp. You have to be careful, or you'll prick your finger.”

“...I'll keep that in mind. Thanks.”

“If I find a third one, I’ll give it to Saul.”

Monica only took her veil off when she was by herself, but her unfortunate face was exposed whenever she ate or drank or washed. Neither she nor Richard made an active effort to reach out to each other, but Monica cycled between holing up in her room and frolicking around in the garden. She was currently in one of her more active phases.

With her veil still on, Monica wandered deeper into the yard where it was hard to tell where the yard ended and the hillside began. She spotted the porcupine again and let out a carefree giggle, followed by a sigh of disappointment when it got away. She couldn’t have been more than fourteen or fifteen, Richard thought. It made what was hidden under her veil that much more depressing. He squeezed the black and white spine between his thumb and index finger and started turning it one way and then the other to entertain himself.

In the meantime, Monica had returned to the kitchen to start warming up lunch. It was chickpea soup today—more than enough for two people. Richard entered the kitchen, noticing that she had a full view of the yard from the open door, and called out to her:

“Would you mind if I joined you in here today?”

“Are you sure? I have to take off my veil.”

“It wouldn’t bother me, but if you’d prefer to be alone, I understand.”

“I thought it would. I’m pretty scary.”

“You’re not scary in the slightest. Honestly, I thought you’d be afraid of me, if anything.”

“Me? Afraid of you? Don’t be silly.”

Monica seemed to be making a sarcastic smirk from behind her veil. She hesitated for a moment before removing her black headdress and taking a seat in an empty chair. Her face looked as inflamed as ever, but she didn’t seem to be in pain as she began to eat—fish soup with round beans floating in it and some hard crusty bread—without any notable change in expression. Richard waited, as was his habit, until they had reached a pause in their meal to

continue their conversation.

“...It’s a long story, but I came here from England. You’re not from Sri Lanka either, I take it?”

“I was born in India.”

“Do you mind if I ask how old you are?”

“I’ll be sixteen this year. How old are you?”

“I’ll be twenty-four.”

“I could have sworn you were at least thirty. You always have bags under your eyes.”

“.....”

Richard went quiet, and the right side of Monica’s face smiled.

“I know, you want to ask me what happened to my face. Obviously, I wasn’t born like this. I got splashed with acid and now it’s like this.”

Richard was left at a loss for words as she explained that it hurt so much, she thought she was going to die. Monica’s tone, just like the smile she held firmly on her face, didn’t seem to actually carry the emotion she was trying to convey.

“But I’m just happy to be alive. He was trying to kill me, after all.”

“...Who would want to kill you?”

“My husband.”

Then she asked Richard what his religion and occupation were. He told her he wasn’t a particularly devout Christian and that he didn’t have an occupation or a place to live. Monica laughed and replied that he wouldn’t be able to say that if he were Hindu.

“Discrimination based on caste is technically outlawed, but no one’s born free from that sort of thing. The kinds of jobs you can have and who you’re allowed to marry are determined by what caste you’re born into. Do you know the word *dahez*? What do you call it in English... It’s when a woman gets married and brings things like money and jewels or a television or a bike or something to the man’s family.”

“It’s not a word you hear much these days anymore, but I believe it’s *dowry*.”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

Monica began to tell the story of what had happened to her two years ago.

She was a student attending a top private secondary school in the Indian city of Delhi—that was, until her father passed away suddenly in an accident and her family could no longer afford her tuition. Her mother’s health deteriorated from overwork, and ultimately, the topic of marrying Monica off to someone she had never met was raised. Her relatives on her father’s side found an appropriate family, but they demanded an extremely high dowry.

“Apparently, they were really unhappy about it because they were expecting me to use the inheritance from my father to bring an even bigger dowry.”

Monica crossed her slender arms even tighter.

She’d been only fourteen years old. Her marriage was arranged entirely by her relatives, who started by comparing horoscopes for compatibility—Monica’s opinions were never part of the equation. Richard knew a bit about Hindu marriage practices, but the extent of his knowledge about the dowry system was that it was a cultural practice that existed.

“There’s a lot of discrimination in India, but gender-based discrimination is really intense. I think people have a lot of different perspectives on it, but generally, there’s this attitude that since the woman is ‘taken in’ by the man’s family in a marriage, her family is expected to compensate them with money. Anyway, being born a woman in India puts you at a disadvantage in a lot of respects. There’s even a saying: ‘Three daughters would bankrupt a Maharaja.’”

Monica explained that the dowry system was once only practiced by the wealthy, but as “normal” people started to accumulate more wealth, they began to imitate the practice, making it spread. Even though it was banned now, a lot of people still participate in it.

“I understand. Or rather, I understand that part. But concerns about your dowry aside, I don’t understand why he would do something like that.”

“Oh, you mean my face? That’s related to the dowry, too. See, when a man marries someone and the dowry’s too small, both he and his family feel like

they've been cheated out of something. So they want to set up another marriage and get a new dowry, but the problem is you can't have more than one wife—which made me a problem. So, they decided to kill me.”

She added that this happened a lot, going on to explain that outside major cities, it was common for the husband's family to live with the married couple. When a woman married into the family, her only value was the dowry she brought with her. And it wasn't uncommon for the family to gang up on the new wife and drive her to suicide or kill her. Since the entire family other than their victim would be in on it, it was easy for them to get their stories straight, and since dowry murders motivated by money were so common, the police didn't take them very seriously. It was par for the course for them to write them off as accidents.

“But if the family can't bully the wife into committing suicide, they'll burn her to death. Public awareness of the issue has been growing, and people are slowly starting to recognize these as murders now, but I think it'll be some time before the practice stops completely. A lot of people have given up hope that going to the authorities will do anything, and there are plenty of women who don't know how they'll survive if they leave their husband. Both divorced women and those driven out of their home are considered ill-omened... Oh, and just to be clear, yes, I really am talking about things that still happen in the twenty-first century.”

Richard sensed something in Monica's last comment. Even though she had grown up in a culture that didn't view women as equals, her time at that school in the city seemed to have given her a more Western perspective. Richard found himself unconsciously bringing his hand to his mouth, recalling the feeling of the earth crumbling beneath your feet as you noticed the massive gap between the world you belonged in and the one you actually lived in.

“Are you okay? I guess that was a pretty scary story. Are you going to have nightmares now?”

“No, I just got a chickpea caught in my throat. Please don't worry about me.”

“...Really. Fine, I'll keep going then. They did it to me while I was asleep. I didn't understand what was happening at first, but I remember waking up in

the hospital and how I couldn't stop crying when I saw my face for the first time. I even thought it would have been better if they'd just killed me—but I changed my mind when I saw my husband and mother-in-law's miserable faces. They tormented me. They told me to prostitute myself to earn money, or to commit suicide. I was so tired I wanted to die, but after I saw them like that, I decided I was going to live. I was never going to give them what they wanted."

Richard choked up—this was the first time Monica had shown emotion around him. It was a pure flame of anger and hatred, as red as the flesh beneath her skin. That emotion, as vivid as the bright red blood of a fresh wound, quickly retreated beneath her brown skin as Monica shrugged, face blank again.

"And that's the story of my face. Any questions?"

"...This might not have anything to do with your face, but could I ask what your relationship to Saul is?"

"Huh? You really need to ask that?"

For the first time, Monica looked at Richard with a puzzled expression. That either meant that she *was* actually his daughter or that they had some other painfully obvious relationship that he had overlooked. Richard furrowed his brow and brought his fist to his mouth, and Monica flashed a toothy smile and put her veil back on, as if she'd just realized something. She still had about half a bowl of soup left.

"I'm full. Sorry, Richard. Just leave your dirty dishes there."

"I'll do the dishes. You get some rest."

"Are you sure? I mean...I guess there's no reason you shouldn't, though."

She mumbled something about how it'd be unthinkable to let an Indian man do the dishes but let Richard clean up after lunch. It seemed Monica had been doing the dishes and preparing the food, not because there wasn't anyone else to do it, but because hierarchy dictated that it should be her responsibility. Richard got up out of his chair first and pulled out Monica's chair for her as she stood up.

"...Ladies first, right?"

“I’m still learning about the other cultures of the world, so I’m sorry if I’ve done anything to offend you.”

“You don’t need to worry about that sort of thing. And you don’t need to pity me.”

“Pity?” Richard repeated, and Monica nodded.

“You can shower me with pity, but it’ll never make my face what it used to be or fill my belly. Plus, I don’t like you looking at me that way, Richard.”

She waved goodbye and vanished into her room.

Saul didn’t come by that night, but he sent one of his female assistants to deliver the food. She left almost immediately, so he didn’t have the opportunity to let her know that he’d ruined four plates trying to wash them.

Westminster Station was so quiet at night that it was almost hard to imagine the crowds during the day. Tourists only gathered on the upper floor at night to get a view of the night skyline. He ran up the escalator, through the ticket gate, and exited through the now deserted number one exit out toward the Thames, where he was greeted by a “Hey.”

The young man bundled up in a pale blue coat had his usual smile on his face. The neon blue of the London Eye was reflected in the water of the river behind him.

“You kept me waiting.”

“I’m sorry to say this first thing, but could I get a rain check for tonight? I’m a little busy.”

The coat-clad man said his name.

The man ignored it, continuing, “She won’t return my calls. What’s going on?”

His name was called again, and he ignored it once more.

“What if something happened to her?”

The third time the other party said his name, the man finally paused his torrent of words.

“Why don’t you have a seat over there so we can talk. All right?” The man in the coat smiled as he pointed to a bench by the river.

It was the first time he’d ever considered that the name he’d been called so many times might not just be a sign of affection but some kind of portent.

There were no tourists around, so the benches in front of the harbor were cold.

“The three of us used to take walks around here, remember? We’d walk all the way to Trafalgar Square. Dad always tried to make it into a history lecture, but looking back on it now, we were really just sight-seeing. It was fun though.”

“...Why are you talking about that now? Why can’t I get in contact with her?”

“We all used to get along so well—we really were like brothers, huh? But that’s why I never noticed the black hound stalking my *real* brother. I think the greatest thing the two of us have in common is that we’re both a little *too* talented, don’t you agree? We’ve never really had to struggle to finish anything in our lives. When we’re supporting each other, we can’t be beat. Everyone around us appreciates us, too. But you know, it’s like saying a car runs faster with wheels on both sides—it doesn’t really tell you anything about the quality of the wheels themselves.”

As he listened to the man in the coat talk, he realized that something big must have happened without his knowing. And he was sure that whatever it was, it was already over and done with. The part of his chest that felt warm and tingly when he experienced kindness froze over like ice. But it wasn’t until the next sentence his brother uttered that it began to grow heavy as lead.

“We won’t need to think about the diamond thing for a while now. I got it all sorted out.”

“...That’s the first I’ve heard of it. How?”

“I flipped the problem upside down. If you don’t get married to her: problem solved. It was so simple,” he said, his tone light as a feather. The other man was completely baffled by what he’d just said, but the man in the coat continued.

“I explained everything to her family. You can relax. Neither her parents nor her siblings ever want to see you again. You can call them if you don’t believe

me, but I wouldn't recommend trying to confront them directly. Who knows what they might do."

"...Please tell me you're joking."

"It's no joke. Man, getting in touch with them was a piece of cake, too. You introduced me to them as 'a very important person to you,' after all."

The man in the coat continued, smiling the whole time, in such a warm, calm tone he may as well have been explaining that one plus one is two. He explained that he figured that since he knew she and her family were minorities in England and that they probably valued familial bonds a great deal as a result, so if he were in her family's position, he absolutely wouldn't approve of this marriage. Because if the husband's family wasn't going to give the union their blessing, it would weigh heavily on both the bride and groom and become an obstacle to their future happiness.

"Money was probably part of it, too. I was hesitant to mention this because you were talking about marrying someone you love, but I think the gap in status between our two families is just too substantial. When I told her that I didn't think she would ever end it with you, even if she didn't love you, because our family could make her entire family very happy, she went pale as a ghost. Don't you worry, I'll find you three or four other girls to choose from. How's that sound? Fortunately, she wasn't exactly drop-dead gorgeous, so she's not irreplaceable."

The dreamer recalled that he never thought he'd actually punch someone after he started boxing. Criminal charges and other consequences aside, never in his wildest dreams did he imagine actually wanting to hurt someone. He found it a bit funny that punching someone in a dream would have no such consequences.

The man in the coat stumbled a bit in his seat from being punched in the face. He groaned as he got to his feet and started to laugh as he leaned his weight on the handrail running along the river.

"...You got me good. I don't think I've seen you look like that since Taro died."

"I don't understand. You're not the kind of person who would do something like that. This can't be right. It can't be. It's just—this isn't you!"

The fourth time he heard his name that night, the man looked up. “Ricky, my sweet little brother,” the man in the coat said in a voice so sickly sweet it seemed to stick in the other man’s ears as he wrapped his arms around the person who’d just punched him.

“It makes me happy that my little brother has such faith in me. Thank you. But the Jeff you know is long gone. He went far, far away and is never coming back. This is a plea from the Jeff you don’t know: If you can help it, don’t show that pretty little face of yours around here for a while. You’re just a little too beautiful for my brother and I to handle being around.”

That last kiss on the cheek he gave him pierced his memories like some kind of curse.

The moment he awoke, Richard was overcome with intense feelings of regret that he’d only taken half a sleeping pill instead of a whole one. The nightmare seemed to cling to him like the fresh sweat covering his body.

Richard brought his hand to his forehead once he caught his breath. He knew they were just flashbacks, but it was starting to make his brain feel like a one-trick-pony. Surely there were other, more traumatic moments he could be hung up on, like his last phone call with her, or the icy looks from his college classmates, that he could feel in his bones. Even if he tried reviewing his dreams, the most commonly repeated one featured the same person in the same place. He knew that whenever the conversation in the coffee shop came back into his mind, he absolutely had to take a sleeping pill the following night lest he have the dream again, but since he’d grown hesitant to use up his remaining supply, the result was inevitable.

As he got out of bed and fumbled around for his bottle of water, he heard someone’s voice. If he wasn’t imagining things, it sounded like the shrill voice of a young girl.

“...Monica?”

Richard knew he was the only man at the residence. He looked around for something that could work as a makeshift weapon just in case he had to fight, but all he could find was an umbrella. He timidly opened the door and saw the

light pouring out of the main house onto the path that led to the annex.

He noticed that the gate that led to the back door was open.

Imagining the worst, he began to tiptoe down the path with umbrella in hand when he heard the girl's voice again. Richard pressed his back against the wall and peered inside to see what was going on. It didn't look like they were being robbed.

Monica was on the phone.

She was on the verge of tears, but it didn't look like anyone else was there. She didn't have her veil on either.

She was looking at the screen of a desktop computer that must've been at least two generations out of date with an internet connection as she spoke to someone over the phone. The conversation was in Hindi. He assumed she was talking to Saul.

"I understand. I won't leave the house. Not that I usually do, but you know."

"Is there really nothing you can do? Are you sure it's out of the question?"

"But he brought it right here."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, God..."

At the end, she collapsed and pounded on the table several times. She didn't say another word and just hung up—totally different from her usual awkward but friendly attitude.

Monica walked into the kitchen. When Richard heard her open the door to the refrigerator, he walked through the back door of the main house. He clicked on the browser window she'd minimized to look at what it was when Monica walked back in and let out a little shriek.

"Sorry, Monica, I didn't mean to frighten you. I heard your voice and thought something might have happened."

"Oh, it's just you Richard. I see, I thought I locked the gate, but I must've forgotten when he called me back. It's nothing. I'm fine."

“I’m just glad you’re okay. Also, I’m sorry. I bumped the mouse and this came up. Should I close it?”

“Huh? That’s weird, I thought I closed that window.”

The open window displayed a page from a social media site that used real names. The middle-aged man who the page belonged to had skin about as dark as Monica’s and curly black hair. His page was public—anyone could look at it. His latest post was written in both Hindi and English: “Filming in Sri Lanka.”

The accompanying photo was set on a gorgeous well-lit pool deck, and it almost looked like a candid shot of two actors with smiling faces wearing a wedding dress and a white suit. The woman wore a mermaid-style dress, her brown hair fell in gentle waves, and her head was adorned with a golden crown.

“It’s pretty right? That headpiece is called a tiara.”

“The word *tiara* comes from ancient Greek. Legend has it, it was invented by the Greek god Dionysus.”

“Richard, are you a language nerd?”

“...I may have somewhat of an inclination of that nature.”

“So there really are people like that, huh?”

Monica giggled a little before going silent as a stone. After a heavy moment of silence, she pointed not to the photo of the actors but the poster’s profile picture. It was a photo of a man’s smiling face.

“Him.”

“...Don’t tell me—”

“He’s not my husband but one of his friends. He’s a movie director. One of his relatives is a customer of my husband—he’s a low-level pharmacist.”

“Does your...does the man who used to be your husband know you’re here?”

“Not a chance. Saul promised he wouldn’t tell anyone.”

Richard started thinking about what the mysterious resort-like facility they were living in really was again. At first, he wondered if it was an international safe house or something used by a human rights organization to help women in

need, but it didn't really make sense that Saul could unilaterally let him stay there like he had. It would be handy as a shelter for a rich person to personally protect someone with, but it had enough rooms to be a hotel. The truth was still shrouded in mystery.

Monica continued to stare at the screen next to him. She moved her finger from the photo of the man's face to the tiara.

"That was part of my dowry."

"....."

"I think my husband sold it to him. He's a popular director, so he's really rich. He probably offered a higher price than a pawn shop or a jewelry store would. I bet he thought it'd be the perfect prop for his next movie. It's made of gold and...what was the stone called again? I know I learned it."

"The white stones are perhaps quartz or zircon?"

"Yeah. That's it. It's not just a fake diamond."

Zircon had a very similar sparkle to diamond but was much less expensive due to its greater abundance. It came in a wide variety of colors and had been prized since ancient times for its decorative value. While it might not be very popular in countries like Japan, it had been one of the leading lights of the European jewelry scene since the nineteenth century.

The broad, triangular golden tiara was inlaid with a mosaic of stones cut into various shapes, creating a band of light.

"It's a beautiful piece. It must have taken a great deal of work to make."

"Of course it is. It was the most valuable part of my dowry. Well, at least in terms of the cost to produce it. My mom tells me my father had it made for me when I was born so I could wear it when I got married. I used to think getting married wasn't all bad," she scoffed before her eyes wandered back to the photo of the tiara.

"The stone in the middle is cut into a heart shape—can you see it? I always liked running my finger along the top of the heart. When my aunt was helping me get dressed, she told me not to touch it because it might make the stone

cloudy, but I couldn't help myself and kept doing it."

Her voice had been cheerful, but she scrolled down the screen—the face of the actress wearing the tiara disappeared, and Monica turned away. The woman had beautiful, unblemished skin.

"But it's not mine anymore. Sorry for making so much noise. But I'm okay."

"...I wonder if you could get it back."

"The tiara? No way. It belonged to my husband's family, and now they've sold it off to someone else. If I went to him and explained the situation, he'd probably tell me to get lost. In the worst-case scenario, he'd tell my husband where I am, and then he'd come and take me back. Without either a ton of money or someone like the hero of Maurice Leblanc's novels, it's just impossible."

"You like to read, don't you?"

"...More than cooking, anyway. I never read anything else after I got married, though."

Richard was distressed to hear the sixteen-year-old Monica say the word *never*, and Monica seemed distressed when she saw the expression on Richard's face. He knew he'd messed up, but it was too late.

She chuckled for a moment, face still expressionless, and mumbled, "It sucks. The world is so vast and full of so many different people and wonderful places, but I still don't know where in it I can exist—or if there even is such a place."

I imagine you'll do well in whatever world you find yourself in.

Richard remembered her telling him that during their last phone call—it made him feel dizzy, almost like the ground was shifting beneath his feet. Even if it had been ineffective at warding off his nightmares, that half of a sleeping pill was still affecting his body. Richard could hear Monica ask if he was all right as he got down on his knees and said,

"Monica, could I ask you something?"

"Are you okay? What do you want to know?"

"Have you ever wished you'd never been born?"

Monica went silent and locked eyes with Richard for a moment before she spoke.

“Never. I mean, my family wasn’t particularly wealthy, but even when they found out I was a girl before I was born, my parents didn’t abort me. And that’s not the norm where I live. I have no doubt that both of them loved me a great deal, and I’m thankful to them for that. Of course, I wish my father would have lived longer, and I wish my mother could have stayed healthy, but that’s what the gods decided, so I can’t do anything about it. They still hurt me and make me sad, even if they’re out of my control—I still grieve for them—but I can’t really do anything about that either.”

Richard felt that her words sparkled like a gemstone. Her boundless acceptance of her current lot in life wasn’t resignation, it was the glimmer only someone who firmly believed that there was more ahead of her. His pride quashed the part of himself that felt envious of her for that. Richard smiled.

“...What a wonderful answer. Thank you.”

“Cool, but are you sure you’re okay? You don’t look well.”

“I’m fine, just struggling to fully wake up.”

“You Brits sure have an interesting way of waking up. I know, why don’t we go look for hummingbirds in the garden tomorrow? They like to drink from the hibiscus flowers. They’re as small as your thumb, too. They’re so cute!”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, I had plans to sleep in tomorrow. Also, I know this is terribly inappropriate of me to ask, but would it be at all possible for me to borrow your computer for thirty minutes—at most?”

“My room locks from the inside anyway, so use it every night if you want. What do you want for breakfast tomorrow? I’ll set some fruit out for you.”

“Anything’s fine. Good night.”

“...All right. Night.”

Once Monica retreated into her room, Richard scrolled up the social media page to the oldest post on the account, copying every name that came up and using the machine’s poor internet connection to look them up. He’d find what

looked like the person's social media page and repeat the same investigation whenever a new name appeared.

Like following a frayed thread until the entire gigantic spiderweb comes into view, Richard investigated everything vaguely related to the man until he eventually figured out the name and location of the hotel he was staying at in Sri Lanka. He also discovered that the man wasn't so much particularly cautious as he was distrustful of other people, so he preferred to hold on to his valuables himself, which frustrated his staff; that he loved nightlife and used several different aliases on social media; and that he had a particular *preference* that would be difficult to indulge in in his home country, where he was a celebrity.

He took the opportunity to look up how long it'd take to get to the hotel, how much the taxi fare would cost, and all sorts of other things while he was at it. Richard let out a sigh.

"I should probably find a notebook or something..."

Richard spotted a little flyer in the corner where dried fruits and grains and other nonperishables were stored and wrote a note in the margins. He wanted to avoid English, Hindi, Sinhala, and Tamil, so he used a European language.

He left his short note behind and briefly returned to the annex to collect his things. He used his cell phone, which had gone practically unused for ages, to take a photo of the man's picture before turning off the computer and leaving the house.

Saul's mysterious house was a two hour drive down a bumpy road away from the capital city of Colombo. Richard made it down the mountain and finally caught a taxi, but the moment the driver realized Richard understood Sinhala, he started complaining about how the roadwork never seemed to get anywhere. He kept going all the way to the destination even after Richard pretended to fall asleep. The fare cost Richard most of what was left of the cash he had exchanged when he entered the country, but any concern he had for his own well-being had long since transformed into the thrill of impending danger.

At the luxury hotel, Richard slipped past the extremely busy wait staff near the front desk and into the courtyard, which was crowded with solo Western

tourists and large family groups from India. Colorful strings of lights adorned the pool deck. It was furnished with a simple bar—where he spotted the person he was after among the guests, enjoying drinks.

The man's white shirt, collar unbuttoned, complemented his dark skin. He'd paired it with a pair of loud shorts. Richard chuckled to himself at how easy it was to imagine someone with a better sense of style saying, "He's trying so hard, it hurts to look at him." It pained him a bit to think he would never be coming back after this, but also calmed him in a way—he was never going to see any of these people again, so what did it matter?

He took a turn around the party before slipping into the bathroom to check his appearance. He found his face in the mirror under the warm indirect lighting. His blond hair was tousled, his cheeks a little gaunt, and his skin so pale, he could have just crawled out of the grave.

"...What even is that face? I thought you were supposed to be prettier than that."

He gently pinched his cheeks a few times to bring some color back into them. Then he unbuttoned the top three buttons of his dark blue shirt.

Richard left the bathroom and took a seat at the bar. He copied the person next to him and ordered a gin fizz, smiled at him, and said, "Hi." The person sitting next to him responded in kind.

"Good evening. Have we met before?"

"I don't believe so. I'm just starting out in my acting career. I just happened to be vacationing here when I heard a rumor that a famous director was staying at this very hotel. That wouldn't happen to be you, would it? I mean, it has to be, right? I'm sure I've seen your face onscreen before."

"...I'm happy to hear there are such great fans of Indian cinema in Europe. Or do you live in the area? Honestly, you look more like a model than an actor, with that face."

"I want to work in Bollywood, but I'm just on holiday right now. You're right, though—I did start out as a model before I was bitten by the acting bug. It's so much more of a thrill, don't you agree?"

The man seemed pleased by this. He switched to speaking Hindi rather than English, which confirmed for Richard that he really did live in India. The director's guard seemed to drop when Richard spoke back to him in his native tongue.

"You've never had a screen test before? I can't believe it. Drink up."

As they smiled and knocked back drinks, the director was clearly inching closer to him. He'd smile awkwardly when the director got a little too handsy. After five weak glasses, Richard groaned that he'd had too much to drink. The director sounded delighted when he asked if he was okay.

"You don't look so good. Where's your room?"

"I have a corner room on the fourth floor, but it's quite a walk from the elevator. Where's yours?"

"Much closer than yours. Here, I'll take you there."

Richard thanked him. Just as he was about to give his weight over to the arm wrapped around his waist, someone grabbed the director's arm. Whoever did so must have exerted some pretty incredible force, because the director stumbled dramatically from his stool, pulling away from the person he'd been hitting on.

"Wh-what's your problem? Wait, aren't you—"

"I think you've had quite enough, Edward Baxter," said a baritone voice in clear, unfaltering English.

Richard's eyes went wide. The jeweler, who should have been two hours away by car, was standing right there at the bar counter. Saul's eyes glimmered with an ominous force, like some kind of shadow that had crept out of the ocean.

"My apologies, director. This man, Edward Baxter, works for my production company. We're in the middle of a shoot, but I guess he wasn't satisfied with his treatment and was feeling spiteful. I'll happily listen to all of your selfish complaints—as I always do—so let's go home."

"Wait, wait, we were just about to negotiate his appearance fee. You can't

seriously make him pull out now. We were talking about my next script! We have so much to discuss.”

“I’m surprised to hear that. I’ve never met an Indian so willing to talk money while dead drunk, but perhaps the film industry just has a lot of weight to throw around these days. Or were you planning to use some other means of persuasion?”

The man had nothing to say in response, and he was drunk. Saul gave him a dirty look as he dragged Richard out of the hotel by the arm. His midnight blue Aston Martin was parked out in front of the hotel, almost like it was on display. Saul thanked the doorman as he took the key from him.

As Richard was tossed into the passenger seat, he realized this was the second time this had happened. While the car sped off, it finally sank in that this was real. He was a little alarmed that he was starting to lose the ability to distinguish dreams from reality—but he was already living in a nightmare, so what difference did it make?

“...How did you find this place?”

“The same way you did. I investigated the photo, deduced from the background what hotel it was taken at, and got in my car. The wonders of modern technology!”

“Why are you here *now*?”

“I have a bit of a caffeine habit.”

“Why did you—”

“To retrieve a certain pigheaded man who doesn’t know how to listen.”

“Why?”

“You made Monica cry.”

Richard was at a complete loss for words.

The short man driving the sports car at high speed next to him spoke in a smooth, deep voice. “I told you, she’s my daughter. And I hate men who make my daughter cry.”

“...She realized I was gone?”

“Monica is a very bright girl. She called me the moment she realized you’d left. It seems her concerns weren’t misplaced either.”

“.....”

“Also, what was that insufferably pretentious French note you left supposed to be? Do you honestly think anyone would be happy to be told that you were ‘glad you met them’ and whatever other nonsense you wrote? Your people skills are quite a bit worse than I thought. I have other questions for you, but for starters, how did you plan to retrieve her tiara from that director? Were you going to try to win his sympathy with a sob story?”

“...I have reason to believe he was keeping it in his room. He doesn’t trust the people he employs. I thought I might be able to find it and walk off with it.”

“I see, grand larceny. That’s a pretty big leap from low-level con man. If by some miracle you did really manage to steal it, your life would be over. By the way, did you even consider the risks of going back to his room?”

“What do you care? I’m positive it was in his room, too.”

“Oh, calm down. So, just who are you actually trying to save, Prince Charming?”

Prince—

He heard someone calling to him. An illusion crept outside the window, and the Sri Lankan field in the middle of nowhere started to look like the darkness of Westminster Station. Richard’s mind grew foggier and foggier. The line between dream and reality began to blur, eating away at his thoughts. The pill he’d taken before trying to go to bed must’ve been reacting with the alcohol, making his head throb.

“...What’s wrong? Are you getting carsick?”

“Let me out.”

“Are you hoping to become some wild animal’s dessert? Richard? Richard?”

Richard couldn’t even tell him that the sound of his name only brought back bad memories. He pressed firmly on his temples and lurched over in the

passenger's seat, passing out.

"For you," she said, offering him a black-and-white spine from a porcupine. The girl said that if she found another one, she'd give it to someone else. Then she disappeared into the grassy field.

Coiled around his feet was the collie that had died a long time ago, panting hard. The person he thought of as an older brother laughed, telling him that he needed to come quick or all the snacks would be gone. Next to him stood *her*, looking the way she did when they met in college.

"You always get so hung up on the little things that really don't matter," she laughed. The words *I really did love you* were interrupted by the girl's voice saying, "Worrying about things you can't change won't do any good."

As the girl who had never once lost the will to live searched in vain for one more spine in the large field, something about her figure in the grass looked unbearably tragic.

Richard opened his mouth slowly to take a breath. The moment he awoke, he smelled antiseptic. He was lying in a plain hospital bed—the kind you'd see in any hospital in England—with an IV in his arm.

"...That's the first time...I haven't had that recurring nightmare in ages."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that."

The deep voice roused Richard from the abyss of the dreamworld. A brown hand was taking his pulse. Saul gripped Richard's pale wrist and watched the second hand of the clock on the wall. Once he was done, he let out a little sigh.

"Do you usually suffer from hypotension? You know, when you don't take care of yourself, it affects your health."

"What on earth are you... This is obviously illegal... Are those narcotics you're putting in me? Stop! I'll kill you!"

"Oh, calm down. It's just saline. You're dehydrated."

"...What?"

“And there’s nothing illegal about any of this. Can you read the diploma on the wall over there? It’s in English.”

Saul pointed at the wall. The framed certificate was written in Latin letters and did seem to indicate qualifications of some sort. He read it several times over but still didn’t believe it when his eyes told him that it was, in fact, a medical license issued by the British government.

“I may be a humble jeweler, but I’m also a doctor on the side. I did a lot of work at St. Tomas.”

“...I feel like you said that backward.”

“Ten years ago, I’d say you were right. By the way, are you still taking any other prescriptions other than the sleeping pills you had in your room? Any known allergies? Please be honest with me.”

“Not really...”

Richard tried to sit up, but the stabbing pain in his temples made him collapse back on the bed.

The large examination room came into view. He saw a variety of different certificates, a thank-you note written in some kind of vertical script that looked like Japanese, and a large, old photo of three men on the wall. The man in the middle of the photo was undoubtedly a decades-younger Saul, and the man on the right looked Japanese or Korean, while the one on the left looked Sri Lankan or Indian. The clock on the wall showed 4 a.m. It had been nearly five hours since Saul had crashed the party.

A door had been left open in one corner of the room. He could see a Chinese porcelain vase with a red flower in it through the door. It looked familiar.

“...This is that locked room.”

“I wasn’t exactly about to let a strange man have access to a room full of medical equipment. You should have seen Monica’s face when she saw me dragging you in here, blackout drunk. I thought about sticking you with the IV in a narrower vein to make her scream, but I’m a merciful man.”

“This is your clinic?”

“Now, it’ll take another fifteen minutes before the saline is done. Why don’t we have a little chat in the meantime?”

The jeweler who worked as a doctor on the side started with a story that began twenty years ago.

When Saul was working as an ER doctor in Europe and Asia, he had two very close friends. One of them was an Indian pharmacist who was doing research on traditional medicine and folk remedies, and the other was a Japanese counselor who worked primarily in hospice care. Disaster medicine had brought them together, and, despite their vastly different backgrounds, the three of them became fast friends. They put their heads together and came up with a long-term plan for when they became burned out by their jobs that made use of all their unique expertise.

“We called it ‘Sri Lankan End-of-Life Care—a plan for a tropical hospice aimed at wealthy clients.’ The idea was to establish a facility where people who had no hope of treatment or recovery could live out the rest of their lives in comfort.”

“What made you decide on that?”

“I’d given tours to the Japanese friends and acquaintances of my counselor friend. They were all born in the *dankai* generation—what you’d call Baby Boomers. And they all said the same thing: ‘This place is just like Japan in the old days.’”

Saul explained that seeing the ox carts on dirt roads, all the people walking around barefoot, the children playing all over, and the people selling produce along the side of the road tickled their nostalgia.

“I remember hearing them say that they wish they could relax and live here more times than I can count. So I thought, why not make that a reality? Luckily, we each had our own unique specialties: traditional medicine, Western medicine, and counseling. End-of-life care is something no country can avoid thinking about forever, so it seemed like a rather prescient idea, don’t you think?”

“...I think this is the first time I’ve met someone outside academia who knows the term *dankai*.”

“Oh. You know Japanese?” Saul replied with the pronunciation of an NHK anchor. Richard let out a little sigh. This made five languages Saul could speak so far, and he had never shown any hesitation in demonstrating his unique skills. Richard, who had experienced the full gamut of reactions to treating one’s unique and impressive skills as if they were normal, was both shocked and a bit envious at how casual Saul was about it.

“Japan will be the first country to confront this rapidly aging population problem, but both the West and Asia will have to deal with the phenomenon eventually. If we could successfully translate the concerns of the elderly into an international business model it would benefit both us and people like them, who feel like they’ve lost their place in the world. And so we started working to make our plan a reality over ten years ago. My Indian pharmacist friend began running trials combining Ayurvedic medicine with Western medicine, my Japanese counselor friend began talking to his clients about tropical countries they’d never heard of before, and I built a home here. However—”

Saul shook his head.

“Unfortunately, while this place was supposed to be a sanctuary where people close to death could enjoy their remaining time in peace—time was not a luxury afforded to my two friends.”

His Japanese friend was diagnosed with terminal cancer and was undergoing chemotherapy, and his Indian friend passed away in an accident while Saul was out of the country, leaving his wife and daughter behind. That was when Richard finally put the pieces together—Saul’s “daughter” was likely this *friend’s* daughter.

“It’s awful. Now I’m all alone.”

“...My condolences.”

“That’s when I shifted gears. I would have liked to honor their wishes and continue with the plan, but I couldn’t possibly manage a hospice all on my own. A bigger factor was the deep depression I’d sunk into. If I were to characterize the plan so far as an attempt to take a negative situation and make it into something approaching positive—what if I took that one step further? What if it were possible to take something with no merits whatsoever and give it an even

stronger positive push? Sounds more like a pitch for an energy drink than actual medicine, right? What would you need to make that work? I'll tell you."

"Gemstones," he said.

Richard was a little stunned by the gravitas with which Saul said the last word he'd expected, but Saul continued regardless.

"While there may be scant scientific evidence to support the idea that beautiful things can give people strength, the psychological phenomenon is well documented. Have you ever had a similar experience? The feeling that a beautiful vista or painting or piece of jewelry has revitalized you?"

"I think so."

"Good. I decided to focus on that, and so now I am a jeweler. Luckily, Sri Lanka happens to be the leading producer of gemstones in the world. Even the name *Sri Lanka*, 'resplendent island,' alludes to its abundance of this natural resource. The connections I made during my life didn't go to waste—and the current global trend of selling outside traditional retail outlets has worked in my favor. That said, the gem trade is founded on trust. I hope to have locations in Hong Kong and Tokyo within the next decade. The Western jewelry market has already been locked up, but there's still room for growth in Asia."

"Uh-huh..."

"But my primary objective isn't money. Of course, earning money is rewarding, but it's not my priority. Money may make the world go round, but it isn't everything. I want to make people happy with the gems I sell. I don't just hope that the rich worlds contained within beautiful stones can make people happy—I firmly *believe* they will. Surely, that will bring happiness, peace, and harmony to all mankind."

"Happiness, peace, and harmony for all mankind?"

Richard was rendered completely speechless as Saul nodded, brimming with confidence. After a few moments of silence, Richard cocked his head to the side slightly and asked:

"Are you sure you don't want to run for president?"

“Oh, give me a break. I’d waste my entire life doing that. Oh, look, your IV’s finished.”

He pulled the IV out of Richard’s pale arm and used some cotton gauze to stop the bleeding before tossing the used tube and needle into a lidded trash bin. He taped the gauze down, told Richard to go to the kitchen once he could move, and then left the room.

Richard got out of the bed and noticed a small figure waiting for him outside. It was Monica.

“Why are you...? Monica, it’s four thirty in the morning.”

“I don’t care. Saul told me not to go into that room, so I’m staying out. But he didn’t tell me I couldn’t get up,” she whispered.

Monica bit her lip, clutching her veil, as she waited for him to emerge. Richard immediately understood that he was going to be put on trial the moment he left the room. He tried to regain command of his unsteady body as he left the exam room, and Monica smacked him on the back—twice. And then tugged on his shirt.

“...You’re the worst. I thought I told you not to pity me.”

Anger and sadness mixed in her voice as she spoke. Richard couldn’t bring himself to face her, but he immediately knew just what to say.

“I’ve never felt *pity* for you. I won’t deny that I was a little shocked when I saw your face for the first time, but that’s not the same as pity.”

“Then why did you do what you did?”

“Because I *respect* you.”

“Don’t you lie to me. That’s just another way to say you pity me. I’ve never done wrong by you. I hate it when people look down on me like I’m some lesser life form. It just makes me feel even more pitiful.”

“You’re wrong. You couldn’t be more wrong,” Richard asserted. He was perhaps even a little grateful to have an opportunity to so keenly feel the meaning of the Japanese idiom, *awaseru kao ga nai*—be unable to show someone your face.

“What you’ve given me is like...to borrow Saul’s words, the energy that gemstones seem to give to people. You’ve given me strength and encouragement. And personally, I think it’s only natural to want to help someone you care about like that to get back something that means a lot to them.”

“...How can you say that when you’d be committing a crime to do it? That wouldn’t make me happy at all. I’d rather never get it back if that was the only alternative.”

She struggled to get the words out, and Richard had nothing to say for himself.

Monica let go of his shirt, looked up at the much taller man, and scowled.

“Richard.”

“Yes?”

“Apologize.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Do it properly.”

“I am truly sorry.”

“Again, and really put your back into it this time.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think it would hurt you.”

“Liar. You absolutely did. Otherwise, I don’t know how many people you must’ve hurt by being such an impossibly insensitive jerk. A guy like you would never be popular with the high school girls in Delhi, no matter how handsome you are. I could call a dozen of my old friends, and they’d all be like ‘No thanks.’”

Richard went quiet, but he burst out laughing after a few moments. Monica looked annoyed, and Richard chuckled and gently stroked her head over the veil.

“You know, I’ve started to realize lately that I can be pretty insensitive. I seem to be paying the price for living such a comfortable life that I never had to think

about before.”

“You weren’t planning on coming back here, were you?”

“Maybe, but I’m here now.”

Monica let out a frustrated sigh, but her anger seemed to have already subsided.

“Fine, I forgive you. But only because I know you’re about to suffer.”

Richard bowed, wondering what sort of “suffering” he was in for as he entered the kitchen. He took a sip of the liquid in a teacup, which he assumed was tea. Two seconds later, he started to cough and could hear Monica giggling behind him.

Richard spent almost the entire next day in bed in the annex. When he finally awoke, he had slept so soundly that he felt like he’d been reborn—an experience he was pretty sure he hadn’t had since he was a child. It was 7 a.m. Monica had set some fruit out on the table for breakfast and gone back to her room to watch TV.

Feeling hungry, Richard devoured some fruit and bread alone in the dining room before peering into the kitchen. There was a gas range, pots and pans, and other utensils. Food-wise, other than the fruit and bread, there was flour, sugar, salt, and local spices, and the fridge was full of vegetables that would be good for a salad.

“...You can do it. You can do it if you put your mind to it. You can do anything if you put your mind to it.”

Richard repeated the words several times, almost like some kind of incantation, before rolling up his sleeves and taking stock of what he had to work with.

Two hours later, Monica was tired of vegging out in front of the TV. She took off her headphones, left her room—and immediately screamed. The floor was dusted white, like a bag of flour had exploded, and burnt pots and pans were soaking in a hellish sludge in the sink.

“What happened? Were we robbed?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“Richard? What on earth...”

When Monica realized that the figure wiping the floor was a man she knew, her eyes opened even wider. It looked like a bomb had gone off in the oven and something that vaguely resembled a cake had rolled out. The three gas burners of the stove had become a graveyard for saucepans of all sizes. A chef knife, a butcher knife, and a bread knife peeked out of a pile of poorly chopped vegetables, as if to accuse the incompetent person who had crashed into the kitchen of his misdeeds.

“I, um, may have had a few accidents.”

“Accidents? Were you hurt?”

“No, I’m uninjured. How to even begin to explain myself...”

“...Were you trying to cook? Aah! Wahh!”

Richard hung his head and turned to the wall, and her little hand came up and smacked him right on the back. He turned around and saw that Monica was annoyed but smiling.

“I get it. You’ve broken a bunch of plates already. You’re just not any good at this sort of thing. You should have called me if you were hungry. We also have a saying about how cooking is women’s work in India, you know. You really didn’t need to do a whole sitcom bit in here.”

“It’s funny. In England where I was raised, a great deal of housework was originally a man’s job. Cutting up meat was a knight’s job, and even Vatel, the legendary chef of Versailles, was a man. And in my attempts this time, I felt in my bones that what is required for such work is not some innate, gendered talent, but...practice.”

Having finished making his argument, Richard turned back to the wall, dejected and embarrassed, and crouched down to start cleaning again. Monica didn’t say another word. She turned around to retrieve a broom and dustpan from the storeroom, came back to the kitchen, and started sweeping up the

remnants of flour that seemed to have exploded from the oven. Then she spoke to Richard.

“Thanks.”

“Huh?”

“Thank you, I mean it,” she repeated with more force. “I understand, trust me, I do. It’s just that there was a time when saying those words—so pretty they almost seem fake—made people think I was stupid, and that caused me a lot of pain. But hearing someone say them to me made me really happy. Thank you.”

“It was nothing, really.”

“...Yeah, but this sure was something, wasn’t it?”

Richard looked away and flashed a childish smile, but she suddenly grew serious.

“But it’s really okay, you know? I like reading, but I like cooking, too. I won’t even be able to use the kitchen for a while after I leave this place, though.”

Richard asked her what she meant by that, and Monica continued to clean as she spoke.

“I’m going to America to get surgery for my face. It’s going to be expensive, but the doctor who Saul introduced me to told me that there’s a surgeon there who’s done a bunch of surgeries on victims of acid attacks. I’m not going to get my original face back, but it should be way better than what it is now, so I want to do it. While I’m still young. But I heard that if you have serious complications after the surgery, it can be difficult to do any kind of work on your feet or even go outside.”

“Have you, um, started sorting out your travel arrangements?”

“It’s in the works. Saul’s financing a lot of it. He’s even taking care of my flight home. I’m gonna have to work hard after my surgery’s done.”

“Work hard? What exactly—”

Before Richard could finish his question, he heard the sound of a luxury car pulling up in front of the house. The engine went out quietly, and he could

barely hear the brakes—Saul must’ve been in a good mood. Richard worked to clean the kitchen at the speed of light.

The mustachioed jeweler sat down in one of the wicker chairs in the shade of the garden and called his “daughter” out to him.

“You’re here early today, Saul. It’s only seven thirty.”

“It’s already eight actually. Good morning, Monica. And to the dehydrated Englishman, too.”

“Formerly dehydrated Englishman, actually, you stubborn Sri Lankan man.”

“I’m just glad you’re feeling well enough to sass me. Come, Monica, I have something I’d like to show you.”

Saul ushered Monica into the yard. Richard thought he was going to show off a new sports car or something, but when Richard poked his head out there, he noticed a white box on the table where Saul was sitting. Monica took a seat in an empty chair.

“Monica,” Saul began, “I’ve kept quiet about this for a long time, but I have a message from your father.”

“Huh? You mean something other than the fact that he told you to take care of me and Mom if anything happened to him?”

“Indeed,” Saul declared.

Monica leaned forward in her chair. Richard stood just behind her, watching over the conversation.

“Your father was a wonderful man. The tiara for your wedding was something he and I worked on together. He designed it, and I procured the stones. But that wasn’t the only tiara he made. If anything, I think the second is the one he really wanted to give you.”

Monica gasped, and Saul smiled softly as he opened the lid of the box. Inside was a jewelry box made of red vegan leather.

“I had been planning to give this to you after you safely left Sri Lanka, but thanks to a certain shady, would-be-thief of an Englishman who wandered in here, I’ve been forced to reconsider my plans. I thought I ought to give it to you

now, before he tries to do something foolish again. Are you ready?"

"Yes! Show me!"

Saul offered the red jewelry box to Monica with both hands. She frantically popped open the lid and squealed, "Oh!" Richard looked at the crown from over her shoulder.

Inside was a golden tiara adorned with zircons. It was definitely the same design as the other one she'd had but with stones of different color. Orange, blue, green, and pink—brilliant colors decorated the crown.

"It's beautiful. Like a rainbow crown. What kind of stones are these?"

"These are also zircons. It's an abundant stone even in Sri Lanka and, just like tourmaline, is known as the 'queen of color.' I think the bridal white stones were quite nice, but if I were to offer my opinion, I think these more vibrant colors suit a young girl like you much better."

Monica went quiet for a moment as she held the tiara. Then she thanked Saul profusely in rapid-fire Hindi. Saul gave a polite reply, and Monica stood up, crown in hand, and held it up to the sunlight.

Rainbows refracted off the stones and onto her black veil.

"Would you like to try it on?"

"...Are you sure?"

"It belongs to you, after all. Would you mind taking off your veil? It'll look nice against your hair."

Monica immediately looked back at Richard. He encouraged her to go ahead, and Monica nodded happily and took her veil off. From Richard's vantage, he could only see the right half of her face. She looked so happy when the sparkling tiara was placed on her head.

"How do I look, Saul?"

"Beautiful. I think it suits you perfectly."

"Really? What do you think, Richard?"

Monica twisted her body a bit to look at Richard, and he replied, "I don't think

there's a crown in the world that's better suited to your head."

"Yay!"

Just as Saul finished adjusting the tiara, a blast of Indian music from the neighborhood completely ruined the mood. It was the usual 8 a.m. routine. Monica laughed and stomped her feet to the rhythm. She stepped away from Saul and began to dance.

"Richard! Dance! Dance with me!"

"Oh, no, I don't know how to do that kind of dance. Now, a waltz maybe."

"Just shake your hips! Like this."

Monica wiggled her hips to the beat and took both of Richard's hands, moving them up and down. Richard tried to follow her lead and she laughed like she was enjoying herself.

She jumped just as the song ended, landing right in front of Richard.

"Richard, I'll tell you a secret. My real name is Manik. Monica is just a nickname. I haven't told anyone since I came to Sri Lanka."

"...It means 'jewel' in Hindi, doesn't it?"

"I had a feeling you'd know that! It's a really common girl's name, but I like it. Look, it's written in here."

She stood next to Richard and showed him the inside of the tiara. In the metal on the back, the letters MANIK were engraved in elegant typeface only about a centimeter wide.

"That's my father's writing. He had such beautiful handwriting. This is mine. It doesn't belong to anyone but me. My mother and father made it just for me—just like the life they gave me."

"...Your life?"

"Yeah. Sure the marriage was bad, but that doesn't mean my whole life was awful. I mean, I'm still alive, after all."

Monica said something about the sunlight being too bright and wiped her eyes before smiling bashfully.

A stone cut in a unique heart shape sparkled on the smiling girl's brow. Richard gazed at it with a smile. It was the very same one Richard had pawned off on that German couple and that Saul had confiscated.

Bandaranaike International Airport, which was also called Colombo International Airport, was less than an hour's drive from the city proper. It wasn't uncommon to see people coming back from the airport from seeing someone off taking a break in Colombo.

There was a huge, white hotel that had been there since the colonial period on Colombo's main thoroughfare overlooking the port being developed by the Chinese government. It was a C-shaped colonial building with a large courtyard in the middle that opened toward the Indian ocean. People sat in the garden, enjoying the view of the sea as the sun set that afternoon.

"I guess we should raise a toast? Admittedly, I don't have much of a taste for alcohol."

"I don't drink for pleasure myself, but I do find I'm more at ease in places like this."

"Well, well, well. I guess we picked the right place to relax, then."

A waiter brought something that looked almost like a silver bird cage over to the table on the grass. It was an afternoon tea set. On the top layer were sweet desserts, on the second were two varieties of cucumber sandwich, and on the third and lowest were scones, clotted cream, and jam—traces of the island's history as a British colony. When each of them was brought their own pot of black tea, Saul spread his napkin in his lap.

"One of the finer points of Sri Lanka is that you can get good tea just about anywhere. I never know what to do when I'm overseas on business. Even the most basic of black tea can be completely different depending on what chain you go to."

"Monica's going to be okay, isn't she?"

"She showed no signs of sudden physical deterioration, she's traveling in business class, and she's sitting next to my very trustworthy niece, who also

happens to be a registered nurse. Even if something *did* happen, it couldn't happen under better circumstances."

The last thing Monica had said to him was that she'd be able to read a lot of books while she was in the hospital in America. She was smiling. She had always seemed like she was stretched too thin, but seeing her play like the little girl she was had impressed the power of that tiara upon Richard even deeper. That said...

"But why did you—"

He couldn't comprehend Saul's actions.

That tiara wasn't something Monica's father had made for her. It may have had the same design, but Saul had clearly collected the stones himself and had another copy made. Richard just had to know why. The question had been eating him up inside. Saul must have wanted to give strength to this little girl, who'd suffered just about every misfortune imaginable in her life. But—

"Charming as ever, I see. Is it really so hard to believe I could be so generous?"

"Yes."

"It really seemed to cheer her up. It was adorable—I could have just eaten her up."

"If you want to support her financially, there are more directly impactful ways you could do that than giving her that tiara. She mentioned that she'd have to pay you back for the flights from India to Sri Lanka, and from Sri Lanka to America, along with her medical fees. That's why she was going to 'have to work hard.' I'm struggling to understand the boundaries of your 'generosity.'"

"I thought I told you that beautiful things give people strength."

"If there's anything I could do for her, then—"

"You seem to be under some misapprehensions. I didn't spend a single cent of my own money on that tiara."

Richard's eyes went wide, and Saul raised an eyebrow.

"Did you think I was some wealthy philanthropist? Ridiculous. I had a patron

for that tiara.”

“Who on earth—”

“Monica’s mother.”

Saul went on to explain that it had been a request from Monica’s mother, who was still hospitalized in Delhi.

Monica’s father had indeed made a request in his will that if anything were to happen to him, his wife and daughter should turn to Saul for help. But those were nothing more than words, in the end. The money required to save Monica came from her own mother. She sent Saul all the money she’d inherited from her husband—the money that was meant for her to live on—along with her own meager savings, to pay for her daughter’s airfare and medical expenses.

“Even after taking a reasonable cut for myself, there was quite a bit left over. I tried to return it to her, but she just told me to give it to Monica. She explained that she’d be able to scrape by with the support of her family in the country, and since she was unable to help directly because of her health, she wanted the money to go to her daughter instead. And so, given the fact that I am a jeweler, I went to work preparing a treasure that would surely give the girl strength. Thankfully, I still had her father’s designs and the molds for the original tiara, so reproducing it was simple.”

Richard was sure that Saul wasn’t telling the truth. There was no way the inheritance of a pharmacist living in India could have possibly covered the costs of surgery in America. Obviously, it wasn’t out of the question that he’d amassed a fortune doing work internationally, but it was hard to imagine, even then, that there’d be enough extra money left over to have a five-thousand-dollar tiara made.

Richard gently asked him how much he’d paid out of pocket. Saul smiled forcefully.

“Rumor has it there’s a family somewhere in Bihar who have come under suspicion of attempting a bride-burning with sulfuric acid. As luck may have it, there was, as is so often the case, insufficient evidence to press charges. But you know, you can’t stop people from talking. The power of alcohol seems to have made them forget that the complete lack of evidence is the only thing

preserving their innocence. A little cash was all it took for them to spill their guts about harassing a certain young wife. Unfortunately for them, the person they happened to run their mouths to was wearing a wire. Once said recording of their misdeeds was leaked to an international women's rights organization, they were forced to move."

"That said, escaping the area their family had lived in for generations was no simple task. Everything costs money—a broker to help them move in secret, fixers to bribe officials, agents to file complaints against the human rights organization—you could say there was a prime *business opportunity* to be had there. It's like chumming the water with fresh meat and seeing how long the sharks can make it last. If you only knew how much they wrung out of them, I don't think you'd be able to enjoy those sweets anymore! I'm just glad to have found more work for my people, though."

"...That's how you paid for the tiara?"

"I simply received an appropriate commission for providing them with the tip. I am no philanthropist—simply a merchant who enriches the world and keeps the economy running, while doing what good he can in the process."

Saul recited a little prayer, plucked a macaron off the tiered tray, and popped it into his mouth. Richard suddenly felt like a massive void had opened up in his chest. It reminded him of a certain man, who was quick-witted in times of crisis and worked behind the scenes to resolve things smoothly, all the while pretending that he wasn't getting involved. Richard was plagued by an intense sense of loss when he realized once again that, when he told him to go far away and never come back, his name wasn't "cousin/brother" but "love." And coincidentally meeting another person with the same name while he was separated from them made his chest ache.

"What's wrong, Richard?"

"Nothing. Do you think she really bought it? That her father made it for her."

"I think what you're really asking is if she was only as delighted by the tiara as she was because she believed that her father made it for her. All I know is that she looked very happy. But I get the sense that that isn't what's really on your mind right now, Richard."

“...I guess I do have a few other things weighing on me. Like why you took me in in the first place.”

Saul’s black mustache swayed as he laughed at the question.

“It was a miraculous convergence of supply and demand. I needed someone to take care of various miscellaneous chores at the house, other than cleaning the bathrooms, until Monica departed for the US. Ideally, I was looking for a man, since I needed someone who could handle both the odd errand and keep her safe while I was away. I specifically wanted a man who was on the frail side and likely wouldn’t actually be very effective as a bodyguard—someone timid enough to back down if she was really opposed to his presence. Basically, I just wanted a man who could provide his presence and little more. A scarecrow, essentially.”

So when Saul realized that the little swindler wreaking havoc in his territory was actually staying at one of the properties he usually kept for low-income families, he thanked the heavens for their favor. The jeweler continued before Richard could get a word in.

“You surpassed my wildest expectations. I couldn’t believe there was someone in this world who would sell a top-quality blue zircon as a topaz. It should have been the exact opposite, if anything.”

There was no question that a blue zircon was worth far more than a heat-treated blue topaz. Saul began to lecture Richard again about what he was thinking selling something so valuable for so little. Richard didn’t touch his food but just cocked his head to the side a bit in the twilight sun.

“...That German couple was lamenting that an awful jeweler had sold them a great deal of fake stones before they came to Colombo. But they still wanted a gemstone as a souvenir of their trip. The husband was fond of the stone’s color, and the wife was fond of its shape. And if it was a topaz, they would have had the budget to buy it as a souvenir. So as far as both they and I were concerned, that stone was a topaz, not a blue zircon.”

“Ignorance isn’t bliss but the servant of indolence. When those two fell in love with a heart-shaped topaz that was much cheaper than blue zircon, they offered me that stone.”

“Fine by me. I just didn’t have an appropriate topaz on me at the time.”

“I see you lack both self-awareness and remorse. I don’t think you actually understand what you’ve done. You weren’t just misrepresenting yourself but the gemstone, too. The issue isn’t the price you sold it at. But some day, that bill is going to come due.”

“...You really think so?”

“Of course I do. We’re here enjoying this afternoon tea, and you haven’t even touched your food.”

Richard was just about to reach for something off the tiered tray, but then he froze as if he’d just realized something. He didn’t move until Saul asked him what was wrong.

“I just had this strange feeling. I’ve always been fond of sweets, but ever since I left England, I think I’ve had...hardly any.”

Silence hung over the table. Tourists were moving back into the hotel with their children in tow as the light began to fade from the twilight sky. Saul munched on a scone, swallowed it, and wiped the crumbs from his mustache before breaking the silence.

“Now, I’m not about to assist you in swindling people. Now that Monica is on her way to America, our business is done. I’m not particularly interested in the life story of a man who would come all the way out here to participate in some reckless tomfoolery, but should you decide to continue to ply your incomprehensible ‘trade’ around here, I will not warn you again—I will simply come for you in your sleep.”

“You don’t need to worry. I was thinking about going to Thailand or Vietnam next. This may be the land of sapphires and tourmalines, but I should be able to get into the ruby or jade trade over there. Might not be a bad area to just wander around for a bit, too.”

“You’re so naive. I’m nothing compared to how aggressive the traders over there can be. But if your Thai and Vietnamese are as good as your Sinhala and Hindi, it might be a different story.”

Richard replied that he was glad to hear that in graceful Thai, and Saul raised

an eyebrow ever so slightly.

“...Are you a creature of the language nerd variety?”

“I would prefer a description that was just a little easier on the ears.”

“I’m impressed. You really do have a surprising affinity for language, don’t you? What about your Chinese? Mandarin or Cantonese? Either counts.”

Richard replied in Cantonese, the Beijing dialect specifically, that he knew enough to get around. Saul slapped his knee and laughed.

“Incredible. Perhaps I’ll just toss the Chinese textbook I bought yesterday. Why don’t the two of us have a little chat about our futures? I’m looking for a Chinese tutor. You see, expanding my business into China is absolutely essential—Hong Kong in particular. It’s now outdoing Las Vegas as the center of jewelry sales. And having a tutor who knows a thing or two about gemstones would be even better. Or actually...”

Saul paused and smirked. Before Richard could even grimace from the hairs standing up on the back of his neck, the jeweler’s eyes sparkled.

“Why don’t I teach *you*?”

“What?”

“You won’t have to worry about room and board. If you put in the effort, you’ll develop an eye for stones. I won’t charge you tuition, but in exchange, I want you to speak to me in Cantonese. I’ll learn through conversation.”

“Hold on. That sounds a bit like exploitation.”

“I can see a passion for gemstones in your eyes. You love gemstones, feel guilt at the prospect of dealing with them dishonestly, and have a deep-seated desire to give others strength. Someone like that shouldn’t be a half-rate con man. Jeweler is the job for you. You already know it’s true. Don’t turn your back on your desires—come join me. My door is always open for those who seek it.”

Saul, who honestly seemed more like the kind of person who pried doors open and dragged people out through them, flashed a frowning Richard a powerful smile and continued.

“We’ll set up base in Colombo or maybe Kandy, rather than Ratnapura, for

the time being. They're both houses designed for doing business, but they are fairly comfortable. Craftspeople come by from time to time, too. Which'll it be?"

Saul didn't say another word. The sound of ocean waves filled the space, and then Richard let out a sigh.

"...I'm already well aware of the fact that you're not simply a 'good' person or a 'bad' person. But my situation is rather unique. No matter where I am or what I might be doing, there's a very high likelihood that the circumstances I'm in will put you at a disadvantage. I think you'll be better off holding on to that textbook and finding a real Chinese teacher."

"I've said this before, but I am not making you this offer out of pity. Pity is an unproductive emotion. What caught my eye was you—a piece of raw ore. You're a gem that doesn't know your own value. And all I ask in return for polishing you to a shine is a small share of the prestige and honor you'll earn in the future."

"I would only bring you harm, nothing more."

"I'm the one who decides what's in my best interests, not you. It seems that you are still a wounded lion. Lucerne is famed for its wounded lion, but to think I would find such a man here in the abode of the lions."

"The abode of the lions?" Richard asked, and Saul swiftly replied, "Presently, Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic nation composed of a Sinhalese majority, a Tamil minority, and an even smaller population of Muslims. Originally, *Sinhala* didn't describe an ethnic group or language but was the name of a kingdom. The word means 'abode of the lions.' Dating back to the founding myth of the country, there is a belief that the people of this island are descended from a hero who was half man, half lion. And your name also happens to be associated with lions."

Saul said Richard's name once more. Richard recalled the strange comment he'd made when they first met. The wounded lion Saul was talking about was the stone statue in Lucerne of a lion on the verge of death. It was a massive memorial to the Swiss guards who died protecting the royal family during the French revolution.

“I have no interest in martial heroism. Thinking back on it, the stunt I tried to pull at the hotel was probably a step too far. Thank you for stopping me.”

“It’s a bit ironic, but people who are desperate to save others are often the ones in the most desperate need of salvation themselves. I’m sure you keenly understand what happens when you reach for others instead of a mirror in times like that. You should stop behaving like that, or at the least refrain from doing so while you’re working under me. A person who gleefully executes a strategy that he can only use once isn’t cut out to be a businessman.”

“Then perhaps I am not qualified to be a jeweler.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Jewelers make the world a brighter place—almost like superheroes, if you will. I think you’re more than qualified.”

“You really do have a silver tongue.”

Saul was essentially lecturing him, like a parent might lecture their child, to not cause the kind of trouble that would require him to chase after him in his sports car, give him an IV drip, and check his pulse. It occurred to Richard that becoming Saul’s apprentice wouldn’t just mean learning about gemstones, but being taken under his care, and that if he did take him up on the offer, Saul might protect him from his family coming after him. But if one of his relatives *did* find him, it could destroy his business, and Richard would have no way to take responsibility for that.

“...How much do you know about me exactly?”

“Nothing at all. We’ve only just met. That’s why we should be able to enjoy the fruits of this unlikely combination for a long time to come. My only real experiences with you so far are of your foolishness and your rashness, but I hope that in the future, you’ll allow your virtues to shine through.”

“You really should know—”

“You could be the grandson of Satan’s right-hand man for all I care. Such concerns may as well be specks of dust before the magnificent beauty of a single gemstone. Beauty does not discriminate—it is simply beautiful,” Saul said.

Richard didn’t say a word. He just stared back at Saul’s black eyes.

“...You know what, fine. I’ll be your Chinese tutor, be it in Colombo or Kandy, wherever you please. It’s up to you for how long. For the time being, I’ll become your pupil and learn all I can from you.”

“Excellent, we have a deal. Let’s toast to your beautiful future. Will ginger ale suffice? And what shall we do with all these sweets? Have them clear the table?”

“No...I’ll eat some. It’d be a waste not to.”

“Have some tea first. It seems to be an unspiced chai.”

Richard picked up a macaron and, after taking a single bite, took a sip of his tea. He immediately frowned, and Saul’s expression shifted.

“What’s wrong? Not to your taste?”

“...What on earth is this flavor?”

“Huh?”

“I could eat sweets for all eternity, but chai without spices? Such a thing exists? It’s utterly inexplicable. What even is this?”

Richard cycled between having a bite of a macaron and a sip of tea—macaron, tea, macaron tea. After Richard gobbled down a berry-flavored confection, he looked at his tea in utter disbelief. Saul took a sip from his own cup, which should have contained the same beverage.

“...Oh, it has just a hint of tartness. I see, this is a type of boiled black tea. I believe they call this style ‘royal milk tea’ in Japan. The tea is added directly to milk and brought to a boil to steep. It combines all the easy-to-drink qualities of chai tea and milk tea. I guess even old establishments like this hotel can try some interesting experiments once in a while.”

“Royal milk tea? Why does a Japanese black tea drink have the word ‘royal’ tacked on to it...?”

“It’s not as if Japan is a country of only green tea and sushi, right? I doubt it’s a reference to the Imperial Family being the oldest continuous hereditary monarchy in the world. I think it’s just that when you think of black tea, you think of England, and when you think of England, you think of the queen,

right?”

“That’s a rather...chaotic game of telephone. Incredible...”

“It’s hard to take that as anything but sarcasm. Oh, look, the sun is about to set.”

Suddenly, a bagpipe player appeared from inside the hotel. He was marching like a soldier down toward the evening ocean. Saul explained that they raised the flag when the sun rose and took it down when it set as he gazed out over the ocean, cup and saucer in hand.

“Traces of when this country was still under British rule. The tourists love it. Nice things are nice, after all, no matter what culture or aesthetic they originate from.”

A man in a white hotel uniform slowly lowered the flag and carefully folded it up, closing the curtain on the evening act.

Saul took another sip of his tea and turned back toward the table. He was about to start talking to Richard again when something startled him—the quantity of desserts, sandwiches, and scones on the tiered platter had abruptly decreased. It felt almost like a game of spot-the-difference. It wasn’t until he saw Richard’s satisfied face as he sipped away at his tea that he realized that a waiter had not cleared anything away by mistake. Almost precisely half of the food had vanished, with Saul’s portion neatly left alone.

“...You can have the rest of mine if you like.”

“No, I’ve had quite enough. And I must say, this tea is exquisite.”

“I think it would be better if you finished it. This hotel makes the finest European pastries in all of Sri Lanka. You can find doughnuts or water buffalo yogurt in any town here, but it’ll be a while before you’ll be able to get another taste of sweets like this. Now, it’d be a different story if we were in Ginza in Japan.”

“.....”

“What a beautiful sunset. Don’t you think that orangish pink looks just like a padparadscha? We don’t get sunsets quite this beautiful very often. I think we

should enjoy it a little longer.”

Saul took his time watching the sun set over the ocean. When he finally returned his eyes to the table, the tiered silver tray was empty and Richard had his eyes closed with a satisfied look on his face.

“And that is how I took that rough stone and began to lead it down the path to becoming the most beautiful gem it could be. And after that, I collected a great deal of various weaknesses—no, entertaining stories about him. ‘How to Train a Jeweler’s Apprentice Who Won’t Get Out of Bed: General Advice,’ ‘How to Train a Jeweler’s Apprentice Who Won’t Get Out of Bed: Cold Water Edition,’ ‘The Jeweler Who Made Himself Sick Drinking Too Much Royal Milk Tea,’ ‘The Jeweler Who Settled a Dispute With the Hong Kong Mafia.’ I could go on, but these are all stories for another time. That said, it really isn’t easy to be a jeweler if you’re not a morning person. Meetings in Ratnapura start at the crack of dawn.”

Almost like magic, the arms of the clock were showing 1:30 p.m. It felt like I’d been watching a movie for the last two hours. It was as if the spell had suddenly been broken, and I finally remembered how to breathe.

“Mr. Nakata?”

Saul held his empty cup of tea out to me to ask for a refill. *No, I don’t think I’m in the right frame of mind to do that right now.*

“...You were a doctor?”

“I got my medical license in the UK. It isn’t recognized in Japan, so I can’t treat or diagnose patients here. Consequently, it would not be appropriate to call me a doctor here. Was that the most surprising part of the story to you?”

“No, it’s just... Sorry, I’ll get you some more tea.”

I refilled his cup with spiced tea, and Saul thanked me and followed with a very natural bow. Then he smiled like he suddenly remembered something.

“Language is such a funny thing. Chatting in Cantonese was very effective for learning the language, but if we weren’t thinking about it, we’d both slip back

into speaking in English or Japanese. You see, I lived in Japan for a while as a child, and I feel most comfortable expressing my thoughts in Japanese. My home in Sri Lanka even earned itself the nickname Little Tokyo. Richard and I have a very similar speaking style, don't we?"

"You mean he didn't always talk like that?"

"That he did not. If I had to describe it, I guess I'd say he sounded a bit more childish."

I could hear Jeffrey's cheerful voice in my head. He and Richard had a very similar style of speech. I had to admit, it was kind of odd that I had a harder time imagining Jeffrey in a drunken stupor than Richard.

"Everything you told me was pretty surprising...but are you sure it was okay to tell me all that?"

"Why? Did I shatter your illusions about him? Did you think your beloved Richard was born carved out of magnificent, sparkling crystal?"

"Of course not," I replied, and Saul burst out laughing.

I was more concerned about all the personal information he'd disclosed. I vaguely knew that he'd kind of lost it and gone to Sri Lanka after the issue with the will ruined his plans to get married, but had never thought I'd hear about it in such detail. Saul seemed to read my mind and smiled, telling me not to worry about it.

"That good-for-nothing coward was the one who asked me to tell you about all this, after all."

"Good-for-nothing coward...? Wait, you mean Richard? I thought he was your 'idiot pupil.'"

"I add new phrases to my vocabulary all the time. By the way, if I mean to describe a man who wants someone to know about his less flattering qualities but is far too much of a coward to confess them himself, is 'good-for-nothing coward' an appropriate choice of phrase?"

"It's totally spot-on, but Richard isn't that kind of person."

I mean, he'd told me himself about how he got dumped, right here in this

very shop.

Plus, I was pretty sure everyone had things they'd like to say but couldn't bring themselves to actually do it. He'd even crossed his own personal boundaries to tell me off, back then. Someone like that could never be a 'good-for-nothing coward.' Maybe he was by Saul's standards, but that would make me, a guy who would never be able to confess his feelings in a million years, a super rare endangered species level of good-for-nothing coward. He might as well be living in a different dimension.

Saul just looked at me without saying anything for a bit before looking away, like he'd given up. "Never mind," he said. I had no idea what that was supposed to mean, but let's just leave it at that.

But wait, why did he tell me all that? Could it be—

"Did he tell you to tell me all that because he knew I was struggling with this job search thing and wanted to give me some advice?"

He started out studying Japanese at a prestigious English university, and he was part of an actual literal aristocratic family—like 'fountains in the yard of your estate' aristocracy. But he'd dropped out of graduate school after conflict with his relatives and run away to Asia, where he ended up becoming a jeweler and moving from Sri Lanka to China and then Japan. His path took him halfway around the world. He had such a unique career trajectory that the phrase "job hunting" probably looked completely alien to him.

"I guess he's trying to tell me not to worry, huh?" I smiled awkwardly.

Saul stared at me with those eyes as black as a raven's feathers, as if he were staring right into my brain. What was it? His gaze was intense, but I didn't have the slightest idea of what he wanted. I had gotten used to it, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being judged.

"Well, if you say so, maybe that's it."

"What else could it be?"

"As far as I see it, you actually have a lot in common with Richard."

"Do I really? I guess I do really like the idea of gemstones making people feel

better. Most people who come into Étranger leave with big smiles on their faces. Oh, was the whole enjoying-a-snack-with-clients thing your technique?”

“Unfortunately, I can’t take credit for that one.”

I choked back a laugh. Serving tea was a pretty well established practice, but serving it with food clearly hadn’t been part of the curriculum. Which meant that was all Richard. I was glad for it, because it always seemed to put our clients in a good mood...and, well, he wouldn’t need part-time help just to make tea.

It made me happy but also a bit concerned.

“Man, I really am in a bind... It’s just going to keep getting harder to actually quit when the time comes.”

“You’re quitting?”

Saul’s eyes went wide for a moment before he let out a little grunt and an intrepid smile formed on his lips. Why was he making that terrifying smile? I froze up a bit.

“Mr. Nakata, you have a talent. You have a talent for admiring the beauty in beautiful things without ever tiring of it.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Let’s say you own a magnificent ruby ring. You look at this ring day in and day out, but as time wears on, the feelings you had the first time you saw it start to fade, yes? It’s a strange function of the human brain—we begin to take the things we see all the time for granted. I think the world would be a much more peaceful place if everyone could feel the beauty of all the little things around them, every single day, as if it were new. Don’t you agree?”

The scope of what he was saying was so broad that I was having a hard time wrapping my head around it. So, like, once you got used to something beautiful, it moves out of the “beautiful” box and into the “common” box? No matter how beautiful the view of Tokyo Tower might be from my apartment window, I couldn’t be impressed by it night after night. I guess that’s what he was getting at?

I asked Saul as much, and he told me it was. Okay, I could understand that. It was obvious enough. Well, with the exception of Richard-level beauties. Why was he making a point to tell me this, though?

“This may go without saying, but jewelers can’t fall into that trap. Because the stones we recommend to our customers must all be incredible works of art, and because if the jeweler doesn’t believe in their own product, there’s no chance that the customer will see the beauty in it.”

“Isn’t that obvious? I mean, gemstones are all one-of-a-kind. You can’t mass-produce identical stones. They always look beautiful, no matter how many you look at, right?”

“Sure, if you only saw one every day, but what if you had to purchase ten-million-yen worth of stones in a single trip—an entire lifetime’s worth of stones at once? Do you still think you’d find them all beautiful?”

As a college student, it was hard to even imagine. I mean, the thing I looked at most often every day was definitely my phone, not gems. I told him that the hypothetical was a little too out there, so I didn’t really understand, and Saul just laughed again.

“No, Seigi Nakata, I can see your answer. You have been blessed with the ability to call beautiful things beautiful without tiring of it. You have the ability to find new beauty in familiar things and express it in a way that makes it feel like it was always there to begin with. Beauty is not something that merely *exists*. Beauty is something that you *find*. It is the eyes of a flesh and blood human being that make a beautiful stone all the more beautiful.”

“I, uh, can’t say I follow, but that’s pretty incredible stuff. Making gemstones more beautiful, huh...”

“Admittedly, there’s a limit to everything. I was astonished by how things have changed since the end of last year. I don’t think I’ve seen such luster in years—it almost feels like magic.”

“Th-the gems have gotten more lustrous since the end of last year? Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Don’t worry your pretty little head about it. Regarding your job-hunting

woes, might I suggest that you consider a Plan C for your life? A little backup plan just in case everything else falls through.”

“Please don’t jinx me like that! I know, I’ll get this cleaned up.”

I was sure Saul would keep on talking if I let him, so I collected the dishes, moved my notes about job applications off to the side, and wiped the table down with a well wrung-out towel. Saul opened his laptop again. He probably had some emails to finish up.

Glancing over, I noticed his screen was full of Western characters. Huh.

“...Is that a work email?”

“It’s personal, actually. A friend of mine is studying abroad on the west coast of the US right now. We catch up every once in a while. Apparently, she’s hoping to become a magazine editor, but I don’t know the first thing about what magazines young people read. I find work much easier. Speaking of which, the day is nearly over,” Saul said with a cheerful shrug.

I got a glance at the name in the “to” field. I couldn’t get a close enough look to say for sure, but I was pretty sure it started with M. It made me wonder if our conversation today had made Saul want to talk to her.

There were so many horrible things in the world—too many even—that I sometimes wanted to cry for no reason at all. But despite all that, there are also people who held their heads high and kept moving forward with their lives.

I went back into the kitchen to put the towel away and gave my cheeks a gentle slap to work up some nerve.

After work, I waffled about whether or not to send Richard a text.

“I understand why you waited for me for five hours that night.”

I thought back to that night at Shimbashi Station, with my friend Hase and Richard’s green Jaguar. I wondered what he was thinking when he was cheering me on.

I ultimately decided against sending it. I didn’t need to spell it out. I had yet to figure anything out about my job search, but did anyone actually enjoy looking at their past? I was sure most people were terrified of that sort of thing, but

they still got through it, somehow.

Then it hit me. I should just ask the two people who knew me best—Tanimoto and Richard. I sent out some texts.

“If it isn’t too much trouble, could you assist me with my job-hunting self-assessment when you have a moment?”

Sometimes, I got a little formal when sending texts. I mean, unlike a regular conversation, texts left a record behind.

“Could you be a little more specific?”

It sounded like he had time now. I wrote back saying that I wanted his opinion on what jobs he thought I was suited for or not, what my strengths and weaknesses were, and so on. His reply was much more succinct than my question.

“I think you could do anything you want to do.”

I regretted not calling him. I wished I could have heard those words in Richard’s voice. But thinking back on it, I was glad I did it over text. Voices disappeared in a moment, but text messages remained. It could be a nice reminder to have around when I was feeling down.

“I’m otherwise engaged at the moment, but I will reply when I have another opportunity. Until then.”

I sent him a thank-you emoji and plugged my phone in to charge it.

I don’t think I would have actually taken it to heart if anyone else had told me that I could do anything I wanted to. But I was a simple man—when Richard said something like that to me, I wanted to believe it. It didn’t *completely* dispel my anxieties, but still.

A little while after that, a mysterious letter arrived at Étranger. People still sent letters in the digital age? Saul must have given her the address. Inside the envelope, which had a return address on the west coast of America, was a fashion magazine aimed at young girls and a photo of a tiara adorned with gems of all the colors of the rainbow.

c a s e

4

The Grace
of Peridot



HAVE YOU EVER WANTED to work somewhere that no one else was around? Because I sure have.

It was a station on the Odakyu Line, in an affluent neighborhood. some distance from both my apartment and college, that I always found myself wanting to get off at when I was taking the express train from Shinjuku to Machida. I went into a café in front of the station and stared at a blank piece of paper all by myself. They told us it was a good idea to do during our self-assessment orientation—writing a third person introduction. Basically the idea was to write a paragraph introducing yourself from the perspective of another person. The guys from my exam prep class were planning on having a job-hunting party after class next week. We always had to be careful at these things because we'd be chatting forever in the lounge and slowly drift way off topic, but it was still fun. Anyway, we were planning to share the exercise with each other, so it was kind of like homework.

My job hunt was going pretty so-so thus far. I was at the stage in studying for the civil service exam where I was borrowing textbooks and making up a schedule for myself, and doing a bit of reading to prepare for private sector interviews. My current read was a novel Richard had recommended for its social commentary, but man, it was just too painful—I had to stop after the main character got out of prison for stealing a loaf of bread and then stole some silverware. I just wanted to beg the author to make it stop. He wasn't doing bad things because he *wanted* to; the circumstances of his life were just forcing him into it. It almost felt like an account of my grandmother's life.

He was just going to get arrested again, anyway. I mean, judging by the title, it sounded like the story was going to be all tragedy all the time. I probably should have told him that I preferred happy stories—I was the kind of person who got super invested in what was going to happen to the characters when I watched sad TV shows.

I felt like a bunch of things I needed to deal with were starting to pile up. For the time being, though, I just needed to focus on writing this introduction.

As I was groaning to myself, a young mother pushing a stroller sat down at

the table next to me. She was alone, so she left the stroller next to me and went up to the counter to order. The baby must've been about 18 months old. It couldn't talk yet as it flailed its arms and legs around in the stroller, trying to reach for toys.

Suddenly, I made eye contact with an elegant lady sitting across from me. She was looking at the baby, too. We just exchanged smiles instead of commenting on how cute the baby was. It kind of warmed my heart. Maybe the trick to getting through this job hunt thing was keeping your spirits up with nice things like this. *Thanks, little guy, I think I can keep going a bit longer now.*

Seigi Nakata is a third-year student in the economics department of Kasaba University. His special skill is karate. His friends often say he lights up the room, but he can be careless at times. He aspires to work for the government out of a desire to help people. He has a particular interest in youth poverty iss—huh?

Someone tugged on my pants, startling me. It was the baby. The stroller's brakes must have unlocked while the baby was flailing around—that seemed dangerous, so I stood up to try to push it a little further back. But just as I was about to touch the handles of the stroller—

“What do you think you're doing, creep?!”

The child's mother had returned. Oh, this was not good.

I was about to explain that the stroller had started to roll away and I was trying to move it back, but she just set her food down on the table without a word and started pushing the stroller right out of the store, glaring at me the whole time. What a waste. I couldn't exactly blame her, though. I probably wouldn't want to have to eat next to some creepy dude.

But, I mean, come on, I'm not that suspicious-looking. Still, I could understand her not wanting to talk to me. Maybe I should stop her and try to say something. Agh...

“You're mistaken,” said a dignified voice.

The woman with the stroller and I both looked in the same direction. The lady sitting across from me had stood up and started walking this way. She wore a grey blouse and a stylish long blue skirt.

“That man wasn’t trying to harm your child. The stroller started rolling away. I would recommend that you check its brakes when you get home. That said, my, what an adorable little princess she is.”

The young woman looked at me, dubious about the other woman’s claim. I insisted that that was all that had happened, and she looked embarrassed and mumbled an apology to me. One of the café staff had bagged up her meal and handed it to her, and she pushed the stroller out of the café with her bag of (now) takeout.

I let out a deep sigh. Once I couldn’t see her through the café’s windows anymore, I got up and went over to the other woman.

“Thank you so much. Really, I—”

“I’ve done nothing worthy of a thank-you. But I hope you can forgive her. When you’re a mother, you feel like you have to protect your child from the world all by yourself, so when your child is still so small, everything looks dangerous.”

She smiled gently. She had two large shopping bags from an electronics retailer at her feet and was on her second beverage. She explained that it was called honey ginger tea and it was quite delicious. What a strange person. She looked like a mild-mannered spring faerie, but she also reminded me a bit of my grandmother’s tendency to shut you down the moment you said something out of line.

“You’re a fan of Hugo? I saw you reading earlier.”

“Oh, a friend recommended it to me, but I’m not sure if I’d describe myself as a fan... It’s just too sad.”

“I don’t remember it being quite that awful.”

“The main character’s been suffering the whole time... I just got to the part where he stole the silverware, I’m sure he’s just going to get arrested again.”

“Well...you know, I think you should keep reading a little longer. I’m sure some good things happen, too.”

While we were talking, I noticed something strange. Her cadence was

identical to a certain somebody's. As a result, it put me in my weekend frame of mind and I'd started chitchatting with her without really realizing it. The café was pretty loud as it was, so it probably wasn't bothering anyone, but I didn't want to keep standing around and chatting, so I was just going to politely cut out, but then she got a phone call.

"Chieko here—hi, honey, are you stuck in traffic? I'm at the café I'm usually—huh? Oh, goodness, did I make a mistake?"

I could only hear part of the conversation, but I gathered "honey" was her daughter, who'd been meant to pick her up at the café in her car. It seemed her daughter had forgotten their meeting and was on a date with her boyfriend. She offered to wrap things up early to pick her up, but Chieko just told her not to worry and laughed it off. She told her to have fun and hung up.

I was still stuck there, having missed my opportunity to politely walk off earlier.

"I'm so sorry, but, well, you heard. You keep them safe from the world while they're growing up, but once they're grown, they go off on their own—being a mother can be so lonesome sometimes. Of course, I'm very happy that my child is happy and healthy. Now, I need to call a taxi."

"Um...is your home far from here?"

"I wouldn't say it's far. I come here quite often. If you head back to the station and turn toward the library, it's a straight shot from there. But it's uphill."

"I know this is extremely presumptuous of me, but if you would be okay with it—and only if you'd be okay with it—would you like me to help carry those bags for you?"

Chieko frowned and said, "You really don't owe me anything."

"I was just about to leave anyway, and I'm taking the train home."

She thought for a moment and smiled, "Well, I guess I'll just have to impose upon your kindness."

I collected my things and zipped up my backpack before picking up Chieko's bags—one in each hand. One bag had a small vacuum cleaner in it and the

other had a rice cooker. Her daughter had ordered them, but rather than taking advantage of the shop's free shipping, she selected in-store pickup, and Chieko had gone to retrieve them for her. Her daughter sounded a little careless.

Chieko's house had a nameplate with "Inumura" written on it. I was about to follow her in, but I didn't want her to think I was a thief or something. I paused a short distance from both her and the door, asking if she would be able to take it from here, and she grabbed me by the shoulders.

"Don't be such a stranger, come on in."

"But it's getting pretty late."

"My husband will be home soon. You're so much younger than me, I sincerely doubt he'll think we're having an affair. Plus, no one who has such compassion for Jean Valjean even before he meets Bishop Myriel could possibly be a bad person."

Chieko promptly opened the front door for me. Before I could set the bags down, she'd retrieved a dust cloth to wipe them off. The interior was that of a Western-style luxury home. The walls and shelves were adorned with framed photos and souvenirs from abroad. I reiterated that she really didn't need to let me in any further, but she had already started preparing tea.

"You're a college student? Oh, goodness, what kind of tea do college students like..."

"You really don't need to! I'm not going to stay very—"

"Houjicha it is, then," she said with a smile.

Feeling bad, I tried to help. She seemed surprised.

"I can tell you know what you're doing. Your mother must be so proud."

"I'm not so sure about that..."

Admittedly, once I actually thought about it, I probably was better at making tea than Hiromi, who was always stretched so thin. Even if that tea was limited to royal milk tea.

After she'd made me a nice cup of houjicha, she seemed to remember something and went to the refrigerator. I assumed she was going to bring out

some kind of jelly, but I was wrong. It was pudding—it was almost the same size as the ones I usually made, too.

“Would you like some? It’s my specialty. I thought my daughter was going to be over with her boyfriend, so I made two, but I seem to have been mistaken, and now they’ll be going to waste.”

I felt like I was in the middle of a dream.

She seemed to enjoy traveling, and her dining room was adorned with souvenirs and photos. Among them, I noticed several photos of the countryside, but not rice paddies—it was a meadow. Maybe they were taken in England? She had some photos of Big Ben up as well. It was easy to tell the photos taken in England apart from the others. She never appeared in those photos, though. Maybe she had been traveling alone.

“Do you like it?”

“It’s extremely tasty. By the way, I noticed you have photos from all over the world,” I asked innocently. “Is that England?”

“It is,” she said with a smile. “It was a whole lifetime ago, but those are photos from when I was studying abroad in England.”

“That’s incredible! Those fields seem to go on forever, don’t they?”

“They certainly do. These were taken in an area about two hours outside of London, where I worked during my time there. There are so many beautiful places in that country.”

Working in England. Two hours outside of London. And then there was the pudding.

Could it be that she—I mean, it seemed at least a little likely with all that, but just maybe she was.

After I finished my tea, and we’d started chatting, I started dropping hints about my boss. That he was nearly thirty and loved gemstones, that he was descended from nobility, that he had a gentle demeanor and liked sweets, and that he was shockingly beautiful. I explained that even though he was so smart and such a hard worker and so cool, he never acted like he was better than

anyone else and I really respected him for that. I started getting my hopes up but—

—her expression didn't change at all.

"I see, he sounds like a wonderful person."

"...Um, yeah, he sure is."

She kind of stopped talking after that, and I didn't feel like I should stay any longer, so I told her I should get going. She smiled and said I could stay a little longer, but she wasn't very aggressive about keeping me.

I had probably just been mistaken. That's why she didn't react. Yeah, that could be it.

But I was pretty sure I wasn't wrong about her.

She probably had her reasons, but I decided to send him a text on my way back to the station. That seemed like the right move. Or at least that was the idea, but just as I was about to step out the door—

"Would you mind waiting just a moment?" she said, stopping me.

I wondered why? The atmosphere seemed different from before, too.

"I hate to ask this of someone who's been so kind to me, but could you keep quiet about this?"

She looked me in the eye as she spoke. Keep quiet? About what? And to who?

She continued staring at me. Her smile deepened.

"It's a long story. Surely you can understand that while the universe has its ways of bringing us into contact with all sorts of people, there are some people you ought to seek out again and those you shouldn't. My case happens to be one of the latter. I'm just happy to continue existing in his memories."

Just as the name "Richard" seemed to catch in her throat, she bowed her head, "Please," she said. I was stuck. I didn't have any recourse but to say "yes" when faced with that kind of request. I nodded repeatedly and Chieko giggled, satisfied.

"Well, take care on your way home. You were a great help today. Thank you."

At the end, she flashed me a slightly sad smile and apologized.

If anyone should have apologized, it should have been me, because I was sure that even if I didn't say anything, he'd probably figure it out somehow.

That weekend in *Étranger*, it felt like things could explode at any moment. Richard was staring at me without saying a word. His face said it all: I know you have something to say, so I'm not going to talk to you until you open your mouth.

When I continued to hold my tongue, his impatience seemed to get the better of him, and he declared, "I demand an explanation."

His voice was sharp as a knife.

Sitting on the table before him was the dessert *Étranger* was serving today: Seigi Nakata's Artisanal Pudding. Normally, once he started eating, he wouldn't do anything else until he finished. But today was different. He tilted his head to the side after the first bite, frowned after the second, and ended up like this after the third. I'd made the right call waiting until a lull in our appointments to serve it to him.

I hadn't really changed anything. I'd just tweaked the recipe slightly.

I'd noticed something slightly off about the pudding I'd had at Chieko's home. I don't mean "off" in the sense that it tasted bad—just that it was very similar to the recipe of Hiromi's that I always used, but ever so slightly different. I did some experiments and realized on my fourth try that it was the sweetener. All I'd ever used for cooking or making pudding was the cheapest white granulated sugar I could find at the supermarket, but she had used muscovado sugar. Taste-memory could deteriorate pretty quick, so I was glad it didn't take me too many attempts to figure it out.

"Did I nail it?"

"Explain yourself."

"That's the flavor, isn't it?"

I was positive I was right. Chieko was the governess who taught Richard and

Jeffrey—whom Richard was raised with, like a brother—Japanese. The jovial Jeffrey had told me that Richard was so motivated by his love of the snacks she made that he worked extra hard in his language studies. By the way, I did convince Jeffrey to delete those selfies with me, but he left up the post with the comment about his family making him proud. Every time I saw it, it made me feel like I might have a heart attack, but I figured he'd probably just forgotten about it.

Anyway, we were discussing Chieko now. For some reason, she didn't want to see Richard. So much so that she made a point to ask me to keep my mouth shut, but—

"I'm sorry, I'm not at liberty to explain. I just wanted to make it because I thought it'd make you happy."

"...I take it that's all the explanation you can offer."

I nodded with a serious look on my face. He probably understood the position I was in from that.

Richard thought over this while he finished eating the pudding, face sober. Then he knocked back the rest of his tea and said, like it had just come back to him, "That reminds me, I never answered your question about why I go by Richard Ranasinghe *de Vulpian*, did I?"

"Huh? What brought that on?"

"It's because I've been looking for someone. The Japanese woman who took care of me when I was young."

Richard paid no attention at all to my expression and continued talking. He must've had a lot he wanted to say.

"Using the Claremont name was out of the question, but my concern was that if she happened across the name 'Richard Ranasinghe' on a business card or something to that effect, she wouldn't think it was me. So, I decided to add my mother's family name to the end."

This woman was definitely Chieko. Richard sighed. I'd never seen him look so sad after enjoying his dessert.

“I thought I could drop this ostentatious name once I found her, but it seems I was a bit naive. I hadn’t considered the very real possibility that she might not want to find me.”

Richard had a pained expression on his face. Maybe they had parted on less than amicable terms. Judging from the way Chieko was acting, I had assumed *something* had happened. But I hadn’t expected Richard to be aware of it. I mean, she was his teacher when he was really little, right? I wondered how old he must have been when he knew her.

“As you so eloquently put it when we first met, perhaps the universe is trying to tell us something. I’ll tell you why I am searching for her and speculate as to why she may not want to see me. But before I begin—”

“Y-yes?”

“Tea,” the Emperor of Sweets said, requesting a refill of his beverage.

Long, long ago, somewhere in England, there lived a young boy.

The boy’s father was an entomologist with a special interest in the rare insects of the Amazon River basin. As a young man, he took advantage of his family’s vast fortune to establish himself in the academic world.

The boy’s mother was a beautiful actress descended from French nobility, in love with glitz and glamour. They met at a party and had a whirlwind romance that ended in them getting married and having a child, but they realized too late that their personalities were less than compatible. They got divorced. The boy ended up in his father’s custody thanks to his family’s wealth, but that father’s love of field work made him rather disinclined toward child rearing. As such, he largely left the task of raising his son to his brother.

That said, his brother’s estate was palatial—they had a fountain, a greenhouse that was a botanical garden in itself, and even pastures by the gardens. The boy had even found himself two older brothers with whom he got along. His life was one free of worry. However...

“The boy’s adoptive father was passionate about education. When the boy was six years old, his adoptive father began to wonder what language would be

the most difficult for a native English speaker to learn. His logic was that if his children could master the most difficult language, then any others would come easily. It was very typical of his way of thinking. He narrowed his choices down to Arabic or Japanese based on the accessibility of learning materials, and ended up picking Japanese, purely because its country of origin was further away. He probably wanted his children to become global citizens of the world. Of course, even children can't learn foreign languages from books alone, so he hired a tutor for them. He approached a friend teaching a doctoral program at a nearby college. That friend selected a Japanese woman for the job. And that woman was Chieko. Chieko Sakamoto."

That was it. That was her name. I put on the best facial performance I could muster to convey, "I know her, but I can't say anything, so I'm sorry," Richard told me to calm down, sounding a little dejected. Was I really making that weird of a face? I probably was. Even I had to admit I was getting a little too carried away.

"About how long was she at, um, *the boy's* house?"

"For about three years, from the time he was six until he was nine. This may be difficult to understand from a Japanese perspective, but while education is compulsory for children in England, there is no legal obligation to send children to *school*. A child's parent or guardian can fulfill that requirement with appropriate in-home education."

"Wait, does that mean you never went to elementary school?! Wow! England is an incredible country."

"I did go to an elementary school for a short while. It is a truly fascinating system. Homeschooling has been a part of our national character for a long time. That said, the overwhelming majority of children attend school, and the system is not without its flaws."

I'd found myself thinking this a lot since I started working here...but the world really was a vast place.

"Now, the boy was quite fond of his tutor. She was very caring and made language learning interesting. And she was the first foreigner he had gotten to know so intimately. They moved from two lessons a week to three, and before

long, instead of commuting by bus, she was given a room to live in at the estate.”

“I guess they must have really trusted her, too.”

Richard explained that she had originally come from Japan to conduct research in the field of education. Getting hands-on experience with children helped that research, so it was a convenient arrangement for her, too, and it wasn’t difficult to imagine that the pay was good. She had an affable personality, so she was well liked by the maids and gardeners and other staff. She was a reserved yet charming young lady. This was probably about twenty years ago.

“...But things started to get messy on the boy’s ninth birthday. It was a Christmas Eve he would never forget.”

“Huh? You were born on Christmas?”

“Christmas *Eve*. The twenty-fourth.”

“...Seriously?”

“Christmas Eve is just another day of the year. Is it really that surprising of a date?”

No, it wasn’t. But that wasn’t why I was surprised.

“I, um...it’s just that don’t think I knew that before.”

“I believe so as well. And what of it?”

I barely stopped myself from asking him why he never told me before. I mean, I was here at *Étranger* last Christmas Eve. It was a Saturday. The customers just wouldn’t stop coming. I even remember joking with Saul, “Are you sure this is really a jewelry store and not a big-box store?”

The realization that I didn’t celebrate the birthday of someone who’d done so much for me made me feel, in quick succession: frustration, sadness, and failure. If I’d known, I’d have put some effort into doing *something* at least. I could just see myself running around Tokyu Hands trying to find something he might like and getting it wrapped amidst a crowd of Christmas shoppers, or something like that. I wasn’t sure if I’d even still be working here next

Christmas, but I was determined to find some way to celebrate.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to derail you. Please continue.”

“That I will.”

The mess in question was that the boy’s parents might be getting back together—they were trying to patch things up.

That may not sound like a mess, but it was intimately connected with where the family would live as the boy’s father wanted to take him and his wife to live in the Amazon River basin. The Amazon is a tropical rain forest in the middle of South America, which is home to the largest river by discharge volume in the world. The trivia I’ve been picking up by studying an atlas for the civil service exam sure was coming in handy.

I had to wonder if it was really a good idea to take a small child there. I don’t know if they use people’s names to tell their fortunes in England, but the name “Richard Claremont” was probably intimately connected with a destiny to travel all around the world.

Richard didn’t comment on how “the boy” felt about his parents’ impending reconciliation. He’d loved Jeffrey and Henry like they were his brothers up until the incident with the will, so they had to have been close from a young age. But at the same time, your biological parents can have this difficult to describe, almost magical hold over you. It’s almost like a kind of magnetism, drawing you toward the people who gave birth to you, character, disposition, and compatibility be damned.

“A little before that, Catherine—the boy’s mother—had started making occasional appearances at the estate. But Catherine was displeased to find that the boy had become attached to someone else as a mother figure.”

“And that was Chieko.”

“Precisely. It was during his third year of learning Japanese. While rather unrefined compared to my abilities now, both the boy and his cousins were even more proficient in the language than they were in German and French.”

“Whoa, you were learning all three at the same time?”

“That was how their education was arranged. The boys were particularly fond of Japanese because it was something of a secret language they shared with Chieko. It always seemed to displease the maids and footmen, and of course Catherine as well. So, the children were banned from speaking languages other than English outside their scheduled lesson time. Catherine looked very proud of herself when that happened.”

For some reason I couldn't help thinking about Hiromi's relationship with my grandmother. I loved both of them dearly, but they were at odds with each other. There were a lot of points where I was forced to choose sides. A lot of the time, I found myself agreeing with Grandma, but Hiromi always won in the end since she was supporting both Grandma and me. As unreasonable as I knew it was, I still couldn't shake the feeling that I should have found some way to earn some money on my own back then.

“It's awful when the people you care about are fighting. If only they could all get along...”

“I agree, but people are who they are. Unfortunately, we can't change that.”

And so, the day of the incident came. Christmas Eve: the boy's ninth birthday. The family's Christmas festivities had become even more grand since the addition of a third son to the household.

The Christmas tree adorned the main hall and every one of the estate's many hallways glittered with golden ornaments. Marble and bronze ornaments that would be in storage the rest of the year were on display, and a mountain of presents was piled up beneath the tree. The presents weren't limited to members of the family either. The people who worked at the estate were permitted to leave presents under the tree, too, so long as they left their names on the gift registry. Now, Christmas at my house was... Well, maybe some things are better left unsaid.

The eve of Christmas Eve—everyone had gathered before settling in to enjoy the turkey to start opening presents, when suddenly Catherine screamed and burst into the dining room. If you're wondering why she wasn't there to begin with, it was because she'd drank a bit too much champagne that afternoon and had been resting in her room.

Everyone was stunned: the boy, her former and soon-to-be once again husband, her brother-in-law and his wife, Chieko, the boys' tutor, and everyone else at the estate. And before all of them, Catherine announced—

““My necklace is missing!’ she said.”

“Necklace?”

“It was an antique piece from the nineteenth century adorned with large peridots. It was a wedding gift from her husband, and she held on to it after the divorce. It was an extremely elaborate piece, but peridot is not nearly as valuable a stone as ruby or emerald. It was worth at most perhaps twenty million yen.”

That didn't really sound like a number that should be following the words “at most” to me, but I decided not to comment since that was probably just the norm for the Claremont family. This was the family that was squabbling over a 300-million-pound inheritance, after all.

The host of the party, Richard's uncle, tried to gently suggest that perhaps she should rest a bit more, but Catherine refused to back down. She claimed that she was certain that she had left it on her vanity before she lay down, but when she woke up, it was gone. At which point she realized she'd forgotten to lock the door. She had a vague recollection of someone entering the room while she dozed—perhaps a maid coming in to clean—but she couldn't be sure as to who.

“Wait, that sounds a little...fishy.”

“Everyone at the table for Christmas dinner that night felt the same way. They were all united in wondering what this crazy woman was trying to do.”

“Do you want some more tea?”

“If you wouldn't mind.”

I went back into the kitchen, made some more tea, and set the pot down in front of Richard. I had some idea of what nine-year-old Richard looked like from the photos Jeffrey had shown me. He had such big eyes and soft-looking pale blond hair that sparkled in the sunlight—it almost made you think he was an angel that had come down from heaven. Basically, he was the very picture of an innocent child. It must have been hard to be in that position with everyone else

in the room thinking one of your parents was crazy. And at his own birthday, no less.

Richard took a sip of his tea, smiled, and resumed his story.

“Rather than beginning dinner, the servants were all made to search for the necklace. However, it was quickly proven that no maid had entered her room while she was resting, and the assumption was that Catherine must have left it somewhere else and forgotten about it. But they searched and searched, and the necklace never turned up. She began to insist that it was ‘stolen’ and that someone was doing it to ‘bully’ her.”

“I’m sure everyone just wanted it to be over at that point...”

Just thinking about how Richard must have felt at the time made my stomach ache. But Jeffrey must have been there with him. He probably tried to make him feel better and reminded him that it wasn’t his fault, but that probably could only help so much.

“The very first person she pointed a finger at was Chieko. ‘She’s a poor college student, so she must’ve done it for the money.’ ‘I know she hates me, too.’ ‘And why was a *tutor* invited to Christmas dinner in the first place?’ The third comment was especially absurd. Christmas is a traditionally Christian holiday, and it’s also a day where the haves give to the have-nots. It’s the one day of the year people should be at their kindest.”

“So what did your...er, the boy’s father do then?”

“He was bothered by the situation, of course. But he had always been one to sit back and wait for someone else to handle it when it came to problems not related to insects, so he just sat back and watched it all unfold.”

“Wasn’t your uncle angry?”

“Indeed. In his eyes, Catherine was just his younger brother’s ill-mannered ex-wife. Of course, she was also the mother of the boy he was caring for, but Catherine was... How should I put it? She had the disposition of someone born to be queen. She believed, from the very bottom of her heart, that her word was law, especially if something was bothering her. Or at least that’s how those around her saw her. And her personality was in direct conflict with the boy’s

uncle, who valued order and equality above all else.”

The necklace still wasn’t anywhere to be found, and the dinner was growing colder. Catherine was absolutely insistent that it had been stolen. Richard’s uncle was firm that no one present was a thief, but Catherine challenged him by demanding that everyone’s personal belongings be searched.

“It was, as you might say in Japan, like the Devasura War. As the guests’ patience was beginning to run out, the boy spoke up. ‘Just do it. There are no thieves here, so no one should have anything to hide,’ he said.”

Catherine was delighted by how clever her son was, while his uncle was displeased. But they were at a standstill, so ultimately they went ahead with it.

“They searched everyone?”

“That is what they decided to do.”

“So, um, what happened?”

Richard cast his eyes down for a moment before looking up at me again.

“The necklace did not turn up.”

“Ph-phew.”

“But the golden tag that was on Catherine’s necklace was discovered in Chieko’s bag, and her bag also smelled like the perfume Catherine had been wearing that night. Catherine asserted that the necklace had been in her bag, and Chieko didn’t deny it.”

“Well, I mean, how could she? She was all alone in a foreign country, and I’m sure she was the only Japanese person there, too.”

“That may have contributed to it, but I wished Chieko could have said that she didn’t do it.”

Richard added that he was fairly confident that everyone else there felt the same way. He picked up his cup, took another sip, and set it back down.

“...And that put an end to the Christmas party. I remember eating my dinner all alone in my room. After that, Chieko was fired, and we never heard from her again.”

“Wait, wait, hang on. I mean, that doesn’t seem right. Clearly *something* was up.”

“What about it exactly doesn’t seem right to you?”

I wished he wouldn’t have asked me that with such an innocent look on his face. All sorts of things seemed off to me, but I’m not Richard, so I needed some time to sort my thoughts out. As I hemmed and hawed, my very kind boss poured me a cup of tea. I was grateful. That was the last of the tea in the pot. I’d need to make more once we were done talking.

“First of all, considering the circumstances, the fact that suspicious items were found in Chieko’s bag makes me think she couldn’t have stolen the necklace. It seems like a setup.”

“But set up by whom and why?”

“Well, hypothetically...”

If Catherine wanted to force Chieko to leave the estate, it would make sense for her to sneak the tag from her necklace with her perfume on it into her bag and wait for the right moment to cause a huge scene.

I had said “hypothetically,” but it was the only solution that made any sense to me at all. We didn’t need Sherlock Holmes to blow this case wide open. Surely, Richard’s uncle had considered as much. The beautiful jeweler let out a little sigh.

“It’s a good point. My uncle seems to have felt the same way. He took Chieko aside when Catherine wasn’t around to ask her if she had really done it or not. I can’t speak to what her answer was, but it seems that it wasn’t yes or no. The only way to interpret that response to that kind of question, is yes. From what I understand, he tried to ask if she had a reason—some sort of extenuating circumstances—but got nothing out of her.” Richard shook his head.

I had a hard time believing it was her attempt to live up to the Japanese ideal of a demure, humble woman. I couldn’t believe that a woman who’d been living in England for several years and was even studying childhood education could make such a basic mistake as that. Plus, Chieko had rescued me at the café—she was someone with the courage to stand up for what was right. So why

didn't she say anything? Maybe she had a reason but couldn't say. Or maybe it was because she really was a thief. I couldn't really believe that though.

"And second of all, if the necklace was missing, she probably just misplaced it. Did they ever find the necklace later? What did Catherine do?"

"The necklace never turned up. It remains missing to this day. It was a rather unique piece of jewelry—it could come apart to make it smaller to transport. If someone really had stolen it, it would have been fairly easy to conceal."

"....."

I didn't even want to consider it, but for argument's sake, let's consider the possibility. If I were to steal the necklace, how would I get it out of the house with no one noticing? I'd probably leave it in my bag, wouldn't I? Someone I cared about deeply once told me that the trick to stealing something is to get it into something else and leave it there, and extricate it from the scene as a unit, because it's too easy to be spotted if you're carrying it by itself. Even just putting it in a plastic bag and burying it somewhere is a better option. Even considering the possibility of a large-scale search of the estate, after three years there, surely you'd know of a decent hiding spot or two. I mean, the Claremont estate was massive. Like, you could bury it somewhere in the garden, or stick it in a potted plant that one of the family members cared about, so the maids wouldn't touch it even in the course of a search or something—there's no way you wouldn't pick up on all sorts of stuff like that. Alternatively, you could recruit an accomplice. If you befriended someone who was also fed up with Catherine, you could plot together to pull one over on her—wait, maybe it was the other way around.

"Did you have any other points to make, Seigi?"

"I feel a little weird asking this, but were there, like, factions at the estate at the time? Like Team Catherine and Team Chieko or something? I don't necessarily mean anything that in-your-face, but that sort of vibe."

Richard smiled slightly and said, "Bravissimo." I guess he was really impressed.

"An excellent conjecture. I'm sure my uncle asked her something to the effect of 'All of the servants like you and dislike Catherine. Are you sure no one asked you to steal a piece of her jewelry? I promise, I won't punish them, so please

just tell me the truth.’ But as I explained before, she, as I understand it, refused to answer.”

“You’ve been thinking about this for years, haven’t you?”

“Of course I have. I can’t imagine anyone would be able to forget something like this.”

Everyone wants the people they care about to get along, but sometimes they just don’t. It makes it even worse if it happens in a smaller community—that puts the weaker party at a significant disadvantage, even children. I think I was probably in that sort of position in the past, but it’s probably a good thing I wasn’t really aware of it at the time. I know everyone was having a rough time back then, so I wasn’t the only one suffering.

But trying to reconcile being surrounded by such wealth and such kind, beautiful people with the memory of such a tragic birthday party sounded like a total nightmare.

If Chieko was covering for someone and even if she had decided to just take the blame and leave, without any proof to that effect, she remained the prime suspect. And while she may have escaped punishment due to a similar lack of evidence, under the circumstances, it was obviously impossible for her to stay at the estate. I had no idea if she’d been forced out or decided on her own to leave, but whatever had motivated it, her departure was still a painful memory for Richard.

“What’s wrong? Are you all right?”

“It just hurts to even think about. If I’d been in your position, I’d want to move far, far away.”

“Like to the Amazon River? My father often told me that I could keep piranhas as pets and feed them pancakes.”

“Actually...”

What happened to Catherine getting back together with Richard’s father, anyway? Richard responded, as if predicting my question.

“After the Christmas incident, all talk of them getting back together ceased. I

can't say with any certainty whether my uncle questioned him about whether he seriously wanted to remarry a woman like that, but regardless, my father ultimately decided to go to the Amazon with his colleagues instead. And I was sent to a Swiss boarding school. My uncle continued to look after me, even after I graduated, and I lived a very blessed life free from want. That is, until the incident you're quite familiar with."

The situation with that "diamond" really ruined everything. But it didn't sound like the Claremont family was all sunshine and rainbows before that, either.

"You've really been through a lot..."

"I appreciate the concern. I can't exactly blame her if she never wants to see me again. I'm sure the events of that day still haunt her as well."

It probably did. Whatever the reason, Richard's birthday had surely been permanently engraved into her memories. But when she told me she thought it was best they never meet again, I didn't see regret or guilt in her eyes—only resolve. After hearing Richard's story, I still had no idea what it meant.

She'd told me to keep quiet about it, and I hadn't conveyed anything verbally to Richard so far. Just as I was wondering if I could justify saying something about her expression when she'd mentioned it, Richard let out a little snort.

"But that's her problem. I have my own concerns, and one of those requires that I absolutely see her again."

"...It's weird to see you so aggressive about this sort of thing."

"Why wouldn't I be? If my suspicions are correct, the truth of the situation has already been revealed."

Huh?

I tensed up, and Richard's eyes fluttered. Why was he keeping up the act? Surely we were past this.

"So does that mean you know who stole the necklace? And what their motive was?"

Richard shrugged like he was wondering why I was asking him something so

obvious. What about any of this was obvious? I was playing the part of Detective Nakata—which I really wasn’t qualified to play—and laying out my reasoning for the case because I thought it was unsolved. And now he was telling me all had already been revealed?!

“Why didn’t you just explain what happened from the start?”

“I couldn’t exactly explain the solution without giving an overview of the events, could I? Furthermore, do you have any idea how many years it took me to arrive at the truth? It would be an utter waste to just tell it to you all at once.”

“And I made three of those puddings for you, too...”

“I saw them in the fridge. I’ll be enjoying them later. Now, it’s your turn to talk.”

He wanted to know how I arrived at the new pudding recipe.

I was trapped between a rock and a hard place. He’d probably already figured out that she asked me not to say anything. But he wasn’t telling me to just spill everything I knew—he was just encouraging me to say as much as I could. It would be easier to spill the beans if he straight-up interrogated me, but as it was, I’d just have to say what I could.

“So, I was reading a book in a café the other day.”

“You were reading a *book*? Perhaps we should expect fish to fall from the sky tomorrow.”

“Then I’ll filet them and grill ’em up in a nice soy sauce. It was that French book you told me to read. I got myself into trouble while I was reading, and a nice person helped me out and afterward treated me to a tasty snack. They were a very kind person.”

Of course, I was talking about Chieko and her pudding. Richard remained silent for a moment before mumbling, “I see. So that’s what’s been going on. You have an impressive tongue. I envy you.”

It sounded like I got the message across. But what next? After a brief moment, the beautiful jeweler smiled softly. It seemed like he’d had an idea.

“Seigi. That book is a famous piece of world literature, but what did you think of it so far?”

He looked serenely at me. His almost violent beauty was urging me to read between the lines. I’d be happy to, if I only knew what to say. *Wait, hold up.* Chieko definitely said something about the book. Something about the main character...

I had read a little further, and been shocked when the bishop was revealed to be an incredibly kind person. She was right about something good happening.

“Well, I can’t say I totally get it...but I guess no one who has compassion for the main character before he meets the bishop could possibly be a bad person. Yeah.”

Richard’s blue eyes sparkled. I could never mistake that expression—Richard was happy.

Wait.

“Was that why you told me to read that book?”

“I see, I see, you did indeed have an encounter with a truly kind person. By the way, here in Japan, you have a custom of making thank-you visits, do you not? Where you make a second visit to someone who offered you hospitality with a gift to thank them, yes? What a wonderful culture you have, Seigi. Don’t you agree?” Richard said with a smile.

I could see a glimpse of Catherine in his face. The power of beauty. If Catherine was “born to be a queen,” then that made her son, Richard, a prince. I was sure he wouldn’t allow me to refuse. Not that I would want to, anyway.

Honestly, I was actually pretty happy with the way things were going. I guess some people were just born burdened by truly troublesome destinies.

It was still a while before I’d be making some on-the-job visits to Kasaba alumni as part of my job search, but this felt like it could end up being a rehearsal of sorts. I had to look up Chieko’s home phone number—this is probably nothing special to someone of Hiromi’s generation, but I went to the

library and used a phone book for the first time. Apparently they used to leave these big thick books in phone booths, but it sure was a huge mass of personal information to just leave lying around. Anyway, her address and number were in there. I thought my heart was going to pound its way out of my chest when I dialed it and her daughter picked up. She must have mistaken me for someone she knew because she answered with a friendly “What’s up?” but apologized profusely when she realized I wasn’t who she’d thought. She probably thought I was her boyfriend from the other day. I explained the situation and that Chieko had been very kind to me, and asked if it would be okay if I brought a gift by to thank her. The daughter immediately replied in the affirmative. I also learned that apparently, Chieko was a university professor who was teaching education. The daughter mentioned that her schedule had gotten a bit lighter recently, so she was spending more time at home.

“Her students used to come by to visit from time to time, but it’s gotten pretty rare lately, so I’m sure Mom will be overjoyed for the visit. Give me your number so I can call you back to let you know what day would be good.”

I was so thankful. Thankful that Chieko wasn’t the one who picked up the phone, for one, but also for how smoothly everything had gone so far. It almost made me feel like someone or something was watching over me. When I introduced myself as Seigi Nakata, a third-year student in the college of economics at Kasaba University, Chieko’s daughter said I must be smart. I didn’t feel the need to correct her by saying that not everyone at Kasaba is particularly talented. It made me feel grateful that my school’s reputation preceded me.

In the end, my return visit to Chieko’s home was set for the evening of the following Thursday. And the gift: Ginza’s famous leaf pies.

“...Just you?”

“Yup, just me.”

“Oh.”

Chieko, who had likely only agreed to my visit at her daughter’s behest, sounded cold and unfriendly, like she was trying to stifle any emotion. She probably just wanted me to leave, but she wouldn’t say that to me. I felt awful about it, but I stayed put.

I gave her a customary thank-you, followed by the standard “I know it’s not much, but...” as I handed her the leaf pies. Chieko gave in and smiled. She offered me some tea and went into the kitchen, returning with green tea and a single serving of pudding.

“I’m so weak to temptation. I’ve just kept making them since your first visit. It’s not good for my cholesterol, but they bring back such fond memories. Admittedly, I’m pretty sure I used to be a bit better at making them in the past.”

“Um, so I heard about the incident with the necklace around Christmas nineteen years ago.”

Chieko looked at me like she had been expecting me to bring up the topic. She didn’t call me out for speaking about her. But if things were always bound to go this way, why the need for the charade in the first place? Well, I guess it was ultimately a matter of honor, so the result wasn’t really relevant.

“I’m here today as a representative of a certain someone. He has something he desperately wants to tell you, but since it didn’t seem wise for him to come see you himself, he entrusted me with his message.”

“Are you a friend of his? Have you visited the estate?”

“I did stay there briefly last winter. It was so impossibly huge, I don’t know if it even still qualifies as a house.”

“You’re not a friend of the family?”

“Far from it. Um, well, uh...”

He’d given me model responses for just about any possibility, but I started slipping once I was actually face-to-face with her. I needed to calm down.

“He’s working in Japan now, and I work part-time at his shop.”

“He’s working? Young master Richard is working?”

“Young master?”

“Oh, goodness, I can’t believe I said that. But I was positive that you were one of Jeffrey’s people.”

Jeffrey? Why was his name coming up here? I looked at her, confused, and

Chieko continued in a sad tone.

“I think it was about three years ago now. I got a phone call from Jeffrey asking how I was, even though I’d never informed him that I’d moved. I thought it was odd, so I asked him why he was calling, and he explained that Richard had gone missing after they got into a fight over an issue related to their inheritance. He said that Richard hated him now. I was so confused... Jeffrey wasn’t on Richard’s side? I couldn’t believe they were fighting. They used to be so close.”

That made more sense. Jeffrey had contacted Chieko while he was searching for Richard. It may have ultimately been a stroke of luck for Richard that he hadn’t managed to track her down before now.

I told her that the situation had been cleared up and that Jeffrey and Richard seemed to be slowly repairing their relationship. Chieko gave me a dubious look before shifting her gaze down toward her lap.

“...I see. I couldn’t be happier to know that they’re all doing well. But—”

After a long pause, she said, “But perhaps it really is for the best that we never see each other again.” Something must have been weighing on her. If you asked me, it was probably the same something that had been weighing on her student, Richard.

“The message he sent me here to deliver is about the events of that Christmas Eve. He told me the whole story and explained his reasoning, too. Now, I don’t know if he’s right, obviously, but would you at least hear me out?”

“He told you? Richard told you about what happened back then?”

I nodded, and Chieko started to look at me a little differently. Her gaze seemed to soften a bit.

“I see,” she mumbled. “...That means you must be someone very important to the young master. I don’t mind hearing you out, but I may or may not be able to discuss certain things. Is that all right with you?”

“I don’t mind at all,” I nodded.

As she nodded softly, I began to recite the message like a shoddy tape

recorder.

Let's try going over the outline of events again. The focus of the incident was a peridot necklace. The piece featured gold and diamonds and had the unique ability to come apart for ease of transport. It was worth about 20 million yen—the sort of thing that would cause a big commotion if it disappeared.

But Richard said that the jewelry wasn't really at the heart of what happened. Neither was the discord between Chieko and his mother Catherine. Rather, it was his own future that had been the issue.

"The young master...sorry, Richard's future?"

"Yes. He suspects that there was concern about the next steps in his education."

Two paths lay before Richard on his ninth birthday. Would he stay with his birth parents and accompany his father in his pursuit of insects? Or would he be separated from them and remain in the care of his kind uncle as he continued his education?

"This is a gross simplification, but I think it was a choice between his parents or school. But the person in question was still a small child—he wasn't at an age to be thinking about his own future career prospects."

"Perhaps, but Lady Catherine and Lord Ashcroft did not reconcile in the end."

I guess Ashcroft was Richard's father's name. I'd have to tell him his dad had a really cool name next time we spoke on the phone. Or maybe not—I think that'd annoy him.

"Exactly. He didn't have a choice. But that was all part of the plan."

"...Please continue."

Richard said that it was likely Catherine who'd started it all.

And she had gone to Chieko for help.

"Catherine was having financial trouble as a result of some issues with her family at the time. She had gotten some money in the divorce settlement, but reconciling with her ex-husband would have brought quite the windfall, making it advantageous to go ahead with it. But she wasn't the only one whom

remarriage would have benefited. Richard's father, the entomologist, wanted to apply for permanent residency in Brazil to continue his research, but he'd heard that it was much easier to get approval as a family rather than as a single man. So their interests happened to be aligned."

"He really didn't need to do that much research into the situation..."

Richard never said anything about what had attracted the two of them to each other. They had probably just shared a dream of love, and that dream eventually faded. But when they realized they could be useful to one another, they tried to start over without the romance.

"Catherine probably treated the whole thing pretty casually to begin with. Even if it would mean moving to Brazil, it wasn't like she'd have to live there forever—she was focusing her efforts on theatrical productions with a small theater in Europe, so she wasn't particularly inclined to go along with the whole permanent residency thing anyway. But if she did that, it would mean leaving Richard all alone with his father."

"...It would have."

"That would have been rough, huh?"

"I agree."

Richard's father apparently had a habit of saying, "*Someone* has to do something about it." It was typically something he'd say when the topic of insect conservation or his concerns about yet undiscovered species of insect going extinct due to deforestation of the rainforest without anyone even knowing came up to explain why he was prepared to devote his life to the cause. As I understood it, that was still his life now.

But his focus was on protecting bugs. He didn't really have eyes for other people. I supposed some people were just like that. Maybe he ended up that way because he came from a wealthy family and had a responsible sibling to take care of things...but I know I tend to be very critical of people once I know they're fathers, so I'll refrain from further comment on this particular topic.

It wasn't clear whether Ashcroft had offered Catherine some additional cash to be paid out once the application was approved, but either way, Catherine got

on board with the plan and moved back into the English manor house full of people who didn't particularly care for her. She had been regularly visiting with Richard prior to that, but Richard had grown close to someone other than his mother at that point.

"Richard said it's probably true that Catherine was a little upset when she saw that he had gotten attached to you, but he also thinks that her feelings on the issue had gradually shifted. And she began to believe that he was better off at the estate."

"....."

Richard probably looked very happy to Catherine when he was with Chieko.

I'm sure people gave up custody of their children for all sorts of reasons. I still had no idea what kind of person Catherine was, but she definitely didn't seem like a cold, calculating person. Even after Richard told me about how she didn't like being called "Maman," it just made me feel like she was sweet but a little difficult—a lovable queen, even if that made her more childish than her son.

"But it seemed her family's financial woes were pretty serious—so much so that if she were the one to break off the plan for her to remarry the son of an English nobleman, she might not be able to show her face in France again. And that was a big problem for her. Which is why she brought the idea to you. She asked for your help in concocting a plan to make him never want to get back together with her."

Chieko didn't say a word. She just listened to my—Richard's theory. My teacup was already empty, and my throat was dry, but if she wanted me to continue, I'd keep talking as long as it took to tell her everything he told me.

"The plan was simple. Catherine would pretend to get drunk and fall asleep in her room and entrust you with the necklace. Then you would hide the necklace somewhere on the estate grounds and slip the tag into your purse, along with a spritz of Catherine's perfume. All that was left was to wait for dinner."

"You mentioned that the necklace was hidden, but it never turned up. Catherine was wearing it up until she went back to her room at lunch, so everyone there knew precisely what it looked like. Where on earth could it have been hidden?"

“Umm...Richard said he would have liked to reveal this one himself, but I’ll have to do the honors for him. Sorry.”

Chieko giggled. She was looking at me like a mother watching her child trying his best to perform. I just about teared up. I bet if she’d caught me being up to no good, she’d scold me while laughing.

“It was wrapped up as a Christmas present.”

“Oh.”

“It was in one of the gift boxes piled up under the tree. No one would tear into an unopened present even in the course of a search, would they? Anyone could add their name to the gift registry, so a single present being added to the pile beneath the tree before dinner would easily go unnoticed. They could just borrow the name of a staff member who was off that day. Richard mentioned that since the dinner party had been interrupted, the presents weren’t opened until the following day. Which meant that either you or Catherine had plenty of time to retrieve the fake gift.”

“.....”

“I actually shouted, ‘Ohh!’ when I heard him explain it. Whoever came up with the idea was really clever, but he was clever for figuring it out, too.”

“...What did the young master’s face look like when he told you this?”

His face? That’s a difficult question. At least, I was sure she wasn’t looking to hear, “Incredibly, impossibly beautiful.”

“The same as always. Admittedly, he’s always calm and collected and not one to wear his heart on his sleeve, but that’s how he looked when he told me.”

“Calm?”

“Yes. And extremely cool. Oh no, sorry, you didn’t hear me say that!”

Chieko smiled, just a little. It was the same smile she had in her travel photos. The only difference was the number of wrinkles on her skin.

“...Lady Catherine is the one who retrieved the necklace,” Chieko said as if letting out a long sigh. She began to speak, like air trapped underwater that was finally being released in a torrent of bubbles.

“I was in my twenties at the time, and my surname was Sakamoto, not Inumura. Until recently in this country, it felt like a woman’s age was primarily an indicator of how many years she had left until she got married. After I finished grad school, I spent some time working at a junior high school in Tokyo, but after a year of that, I returned to school and decided to go to England. I’d realized I wanted to do more research. But I already had a fiancé, so I knew I wouldn’t be able to work as a researcher for much longer.”

Chieko explained that she’d decided to study abroad to buy herself a bit more time. So she got a letter of recommendation from one of her professors and headed straight to London.

The head of her lab was the one who brought her the tutor job. He came to her and said, “I know you’re a very serious student, Chieko, but I happen to have a friend who’s related to an earl.” Chieko consulted a dictionary when she went back to her apartment that day, wondering if *earl* could possibly mean anything else. This was back before we all had smartphones.

She took the job just to see what it was like, but Richard, Jeffrey, and eventually everyone else at the estate ended up growing attached to her. But of course they did. The teachers whom kids encounter when they’re young influence them for the rest of their lives. Richard surely had his wonderful governess to thank for his intimate knowledge of Japan. Even Jeffrey remembered how she made textbooks for them herself. She must have been a very good teacher.

“Young masters Jeffrey and Richard got along so well with me that I started to think of them as my own brothers. I was surprised when Henry came home from the dorm at Windsor. He was a proper little gentleman who was forced to grow up faster than the other two. Both the earl and his wife were very kind people, and I was so happy when they invited me to stay at the estate, but... that’s why I didn’t realize right away.”

“That they had no intention of letting me go back to Japan,” Chieko added in a whisper.

The more Chieko poured into the two young boys’ education, the warmer the Claremont family grew toward her, and one day, the earl, Jeffrey’s father, came

to Chieko with a proposal. He asked her what her plans were once she finished her doctorate and asked if she'd be interested in continuing to work for him.

Chieko had envisioned working part-time at the estate to gather data on the two English boys until Richard was ready to start school, then returning to her university in Japan to present her thesis. But when she told the earl this, he asked if that wasn't a bit old-fashioned and suggested that she might have a future as a researcher. When he sincerely suggested that she could bring her fiancé over from Japan, Chieko started to feel the walls closing in.

"Now this is just my speculation, but I think they didn't know how to deal with Catherine. She was a handful on her own, but it was made worse by the family members in her orbit who were always hurting for money. I imagine it's obvious from the name 'de Vulpian,' but she is also descended from the aristocracy. But it's my understanding that the family's only real asset at the time was a small villa in the south of France, and that they operated as sort of 'nobility for hire.' Have you ever heard of that sort of thing? It's where wealthy people hire folks with prestigious names to come to their parties and introduce them to their friends to lend a veneer of legitimacy to their wealth—like living mannequins. Apparently, it's fairly common in France and Italy."

The earl felt every child needed a mother, but Catherine was unfit for the job. So why not have someone else fill that role for Richard? Someone kind and helpful, who didn't come with baggage—and someone who could be dismissed if it came down to it. Like a Japanese doctoral student.

If that was really his reasoning, I could see why it might have soured her on the job.

"I didn't feel any malice from him. After all, he was paying me well enough that I was able to save far more money than my soon-to-be husband at the time. I still have some of that money left over now. But I started to feel like I was being kept as a convenient pet, and that scared me."

Before Richard's ninth birthday, Chieko was already starting to think about going home to Japan. Thanks to the two very clever young masters, she had all the data she needed from her field work. Just as she was planning to go home, finish her research, graduate, get married, and have kids—

—she met Catherine.

“When I first met Catherine, I knew from the moment I laid eyes on her that she was Richard’s mother. She arrived in a Mercedes-Benz, wearing a white fur coat. The earl’s wife was an animal rights advocate who was staunchly opposed to the fur trade, so it must have been a deliberate choice. She carried herself like a queen. She was never satisfied unless she was first and foremost in everyone’s minds at all times.”

Chieko’s voice wavered as she whispered, “And she was the kind of person who thought of herself as a woman, an actress, and even a queen, but never a mother.”

“I was the complete opposite. I could never have even imagined a life like that. Sure, plenty of people were railing against the old-fashioned notion that women could only do office work, be secretaries, or teach before they ultimately got married and settled down into the role of wife at the time, but no one ever taught me what other kinds of lives were possible. So to me, Catherine seemed almost like she was living in the future.”

Chieko confessed that that was probably why they didn’t really get along. Not only did Catherine have no interest in getting to know her—but even if she was living in the future, Chieko had a hard time with the way she expected even her own child to treat her like a queen.

“She could handle men with the skill of a wild animal trainer, but she had no idea how to handle sweet young boys. She hadn’t the faintest idea of what children want from their parents. Young master Richard was a clever child, and he quickly learned what answers would delight his mother, but he began to struggle to allow himself to act like a child. I couldn’t help but try to indulge him with sweets that I was sent from Japan and books and whatnot, but I’m sure from Catherine’s perspective, I seemed like some irksome intruder, sweeping in to take all the glory without doing any of the hard work. Thinking back on it now, if I hadn’t been there, maybe their relationship would have ended up a bit differently.”

Cliques began to form at the estate—although, considering the earl was on Chieko’s side, it was the one with an overwhelming majority of support—and a

constant hostility began to grow between the two women. But just before Christmas, Catherine came to Chieko asking for her help.

“Lady Catherine had summoned me to the greenhouse on the edge of the grounds. From a distance, it looked like a little tent made of crystal. Have you seen it? It was Christmas, so snow was falling over the rest of the yard, but the botanical garden in the greenhouse was warm—banana trees were growing in it. When she asked for a favor, I was initially dead set on turning her down, no matter what she was asking for. It was my chance to tell the queen ‘*non*.’ But I caved the moment she broke down crying in front of me. If such a beautiful person was in trouble and I was able to help, how could I say no? In that moment, Lady Catherine was... I don’t think I’ve ever really felt anything like this before, but she was as beautiful as a character from a fantasy world. Almost the human embodiment of very concept of beauty itself.”

“I get it. Trust me, I get it.”

“Oh. Do you now,” she said, forcing a smile.

She must have thought I was just trying to be polite. But I really did understand what she meant. If Catherine had, in that moment, the same power I feel from Richard every day at *Étranger*, it would have been next to impossible to turn her down. Just the thought of Richard coming to me crying and begging for my help makes me want to tear my heart out. Of course I would do whatever he asked me to—even if it meant leaping into a fire or diving into the ocean. But regardless.

“I’m sure you still would have listened if Catherine had come to you asking for help with something with Richard’s interests in mind.”

“...Yes, perhaps you’re right.”

There was something very heavy about her voice as she spoke.

“When I saw how pale her face was, it suddenly hit me. As I was making my way to the greenhouse, all I could think about was ‘What will I do if she tries to bully me?’ But she must have been thinking the very same thing about me. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that we were both women living in this marvelous mansion with no one to turn to for help. We didn’t actually hate each other at all. We’d hardly even spoken to each other, but we’d both gotten

so wrapped up in everything going on around us, we'd both failed to take the opportunity to actually look at each other."

Occasionally, at the end of a conversation peppered with French, Catherine would take Chieko's hand and say—

"“Of course, I could take Richard back with me to France and raise him by myself. But if he came with me, I could only give him a future as an actor and nothing more. And I couldn't bear the thought of doing that to him.” She probably wanted young masters Richard and Jeffrey to remain close friends even after they grew up.”

If I had to guess, she probably didn't want either of them to end up in a situation where one had to ask the other for money. Considering Catherine's situation, Richard would probably have inherited her financial hardships. In that sense, I think she made the right choice, no matter how it might have turned out.

And so, the two women who were supposed to be enemies formed an alliance on Christmas Eve and put their plot into action.

The earl may have dismissed Chieko, but he didn't want the incident to hinder her studies, so he didn't tell the university why he'd fired her.

And then Chieko gave me a brief rundown of her story after she returned to Japan. She became a housewife and had her daughter, but she started to get burned out on the stay-at-home mom thing. Her husband suggested she go back into teaching, and that inspired her to go back to work. She was still working as a teacher, in fact. Her students still came to visit from time to time, just like her daughter had said. She was eighteen and working on an associate's degree. It sounded like Chieko had a wonderful life. But her expression didn't lighten at all as she spoke.

"What pained me a bit was the fact that I could never return to England again. I've been all over the world, but I've never been back there since. When I was studying abroad, I'd hoped to come back to visit, too."

Chieko apologized. I could see resentment in her face. *Oh, I know that look.* She was angry with herself.

“Think about it for a moment. My husband’s expectations, Lady Catherine’s plans, and my career aspirations were all nothing more than our own selfish adult concerns. And a little boy, who didn’t know about any of that, was crushed between those competing interests. None of us were putting his needs and interests first. Do you think anyone would want to see their mother shunned like that on their birthday?”

“But without her plot, Richard would have ended up going to the Amazon, right?”

“That’s a good question. I suspect the earl would have put a stop to it somehow, but if that had ended up happening, it likely would have been Lord Ashcroft who would have lost his place at the estate. Someone had to lose in that situation.”

And that person ended up being Richard.

“Lady Catherine’s plot was clearly meant to be in service of her son, but...it made me question why I was studying education in the first place. I couldn’t even finish the job I’d started with this child who had grown so attached to me, and then...when I got that call from young master Jeffrey, I was so shocked. If only I hadn’t done that, then maybe—”

“I-It’s fine! Their fight had nothing to do with you, and it’s all settled now.”

“I’m glad to hear that. But even if this big issue has been resolved, relationships once broken can’t always go back to what they were. Not unlike broken glass.”

It’s true that even if you repair a cracked vase, it becomes something different from what it was in its pristine form. The pain Richard experienced couldn’t be erased. But none of that was Chieko’s fault at all.

“Um.”

“Oh goodness, I am such a scatterbrain. I never got your name from my daughter. I hope you don’t mind my asking now.”

“...It’s Seigi. Seigi Nakata. Seigi is written just like ‘justice.’”

“Mr. Seigi Nakata. Thank you for being so thoughtful. But I’m sorry, I’m

expecting another guest today. I hope you don't mind ending things here."

Just as Chieko was trying to get me to leave, I heard the front door open and a young girl rush in, calling, "Mooooom!" It was the same voice I'd heard on the phone. Chieko looked flustered.

"Goodness, honey, what's wrong? Did we get a phone call or something?"

"Mom, I don't like the looks of this. There's gotta be like a TV crew out there or something."

"What? I don't understand. Are you sure it's not for the Shimodas next door?"

"No! There's some, like, celebrity or something waiting outside the house. What's their deal? I wonder if I could snap a picture. They've gotta be a model or an actor or something."

"Lady Catherine," Chieko whispered. But she seemed to realize that wasn't plausible pretty quickly.

Yes, it is exactly who you think it is. He's actually been waiting out there this whole time. I hadn't expected the conversation to go on quite this long, and I kept missing the opportunity to bring it up. I was sure I would be getting a lecture from young master Richard when all this was over.

Chieko looked at me, and I lowered my head.

"I am extremely sorry. But he begged me, and I was powerless to say no..."

"How can you expect me to face him?"

"All right, I'll tell him to withdraw then! That's it for tonight!"

"This isn't a joke."

Chieko muttered something about having to apologize and stood up. She pushed past her daughter, who was loitering in the entryway with her cell phone—I bowed to her and apologized as I followed—and opened the door. The motion-detector light flickered on, revealing a single figure in the quiet neighborhood.

A man, just standing there, waiting.

"Chieko."

It was Richard. His face was always beautiful, but today it may as well have been criminal. He was even cuter than usual. If his usual face was a matcha frappé, then the way he looked in that moment was like a matcha frappé with whipped cream and chocolate chips and muscovado sugar. Impossibly sweet. He had such an innocent, childlike look on his face when he saw Chieko.

“It’s been far too long.”

“Oh goodness...look at you...”

“I heard you got married. I hope you’ll accept my admittedly belated congratulations. And also...um...how should I put this. I’m rather stumped. I can’t seem to find the words.”

“Oh, goodness gracious...”

Her daughter came out in sandals asking what was going on, so I explained to her that he wasn’t anyone suspicious—he was an English boy whom Chieko had cared for in the past, and he had come to thank her. Her daughter seemed surprised to hear her mother had done anything of the sort. Chieko introduced her daughter, Mika, to Richard, and he flashed her a beautiful smile and bowed. And then he looked at Chieko again with an earnest look in his eyes.

“I know. I know that it wasn’t your fault but that you continue to feel responsible for it. Of the many gifts you gave me, learning to ‘accept things as they are’ was one of them. So, what do you think? Has my Japanese improved since we last spoke?”

“Yes, shockingly so. Oh goodness...you’re working in Japan now?”

“I run a jewelry shop in Ginza.”

“Oh my...you really picked the perfect job.”

“I think so as well. Now, I know this is incredibly rude of me, but I have one request to make. Would you shake my hand...no, would you please give me a hug?”

I felt like I’d been told to look away, so I ended up looking at Mika and started making awkward small talk about how it was still pretty cold in the evening. I was pretty sure Chieko was the only woman in the entire world who could get

the ever-cool Richard to ask for a hug.

After their touching hug, Richard interrupted with some small talk for a bit, before she mumbled to herself.

“I feel like I’ve just done a disservice to all of the female film fans around the world...”

Chieko looked a bit overcome, but happy, and Richard smiled awkwardly. For a moment, I tried to imagine French actor Richard. I was pretty sure someone had compared him to a beautiful male actor who appears in art films that show at single-screen art house cinemas, but maybe that was another possible future for him. But it would have been a future where I’d have no chance of ever meeting him.

There may have been a lot of moving parts that all had to fall into place, but I was grateful for the scene I witnessed that night. I loved seeing people happy like this. I was so glad that it worked out.

Apparently, Chieko hadn’t been fibbing about having another guest that night. She felt a bit remiss that she couldn’t invite Richard in, but Richard being Richard, he apologized for showing up so late without calling first. At any rate, I knew that Richard was not fit to stand around and chat, so I decided to wrap things up there. I dragged Richard away as we said our see-you-another-days, and just as Chieko shut the door and we were about to leave—

“Oh, pardon me.”

Right before we got to the front gate, I heard a metal clink—someone was on their way in. It was only about three steps from there to the front door. I narrowly collided with the other person and lowered my head to apologize when—

“Huh? Seigi and Richard?”

“What?”

Suddenly, memories flashed through my mind. I tried to remember who that face belonged to. The ruby that belonged to Mami Sasu. The aquamarine for Tanimoto. It was him. I knew this person.

“Mr....Homura?”

The man in the suit was undoubtedly Mr. Homura, one of Étranger’s regulars.

“Is that really you, Seigi?”

“It is, but why are you here?”

“This is my girlfriend’s house...”

Mr. Homura and I looked away as if we’d both seen despair in the other’s eyes. Oh, so *he* was Mika’s boyfriend. But she was only eighteen? That was a massive age difference. How did that even happen? No, this isn’t the time to be thinking about that. How is this happening *again*?

After a beat, Mr. Homura let out a trembling sigh and smiled ever so slightly. He had this awkward look on his face like he wanted to say, “Yeah, I know,” but he also looked just so exhausted. Trust me, I knew, too. I was like the god of pestilence to his love life, and here I was. It was like drawing “very bad luck” three times in a row from the fortune teller. I hadn’t actually done anything I needed to apologize for, but I still felt like getting down on my hands and knees and begging for forgiveness.

While we were stuck there frozen, not saying a word, I could hear Chieko’s voice from inside the house.

“Wait, honey, we don’t have anything to serve with tea. I’ll run out to grab something, but I think Mr. Homura is already here.”

“I told you, you don’t have to worry about that stuff with my boyfriend. But, wow, Richard sure is incredible. He really lights up any space he’s in.”

We could hear everything they were saying. The house’s walls were thin. They weren’t even in the entryway, but the living room and I could hear every word they were saying. The light began to drain from Mr. Homura’s eyes. Crap. Oh, crap! Considering when Tanimoto was seeing him, Mr. Homura and Mika must have only been dating for six months at most. If they were already thinking about getting married, I really needed to avoid making any unnecessary waves.

“That again? But are you sure about this? Getting married while you’re still in school isn’t as easy as you think it is. There’s no reason to rush into marriage

these days.”

“You think so? Ugh, I always start to doubt myself when you say things like that.”

Oh, I thought so. Crap. Mr. Homura’s smile deepened further. This wasn’t a conversation we should be listening in on. Should I encourage him to move away? Was that the right move?

But just as I was about to open my mouth, Richard grabbed my arm. I looked at him confused, and my beautiful boss shook his head.

Right after that, Mika responded to her mother.

“Just kidding. I’ve thought about it a hundred times over. You know, I’m not going to marry him just to get married or because I want to be a rich trophy wife or something. I just love Takashi and want to be the most important person in his life.”

“But you’re still so young. Feelings change, you know?”

“Trust me, I know better than you just how fickle people’s feelings can be. I have a special talent for getting my heart broken. I’m only eighteen, and I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve been dumped because he ‘fell in love with someone else.’ But thinking about it now, maybe that was all because fate had a wonderful prince waiting for me.”

“Honey, you should know better than to call men ‘princes.’ What year are we living in?”

“I know, Mom, I know! But I’m not dropping out of school just because I’m getting married. I’m getting my degree, and I’m going to become an accountant. Takashi even gave me his blessing. It’s not that complicated. I have someone I love very much, and we both want to be together forever even if it might come with some challenges, so there’s no reason for me to stay single either.”

“But didn’t you lie and tell him you were twenty-three when you started dating? I’m not so sure about—”

“Ugh! Did you really have to bring that up again?!”

And then, through the course of Chieko and Mika’s conversation, we learned

that Mika had met Mr. Homura when she tagged along with an older cousin who had been set up with him as a potential marriage match. Instead, she and Mr. Homura ended up hitting it off and started dating after that. When Mr. Homura learned how substantial their age gap was, he tried to break it off, but Mika wouldn't let him. "You're going to regret not dating me," she told him, apparently. I know this is a weird way to put it, but I thought that was a kind of manly thing to say. She was a brave person who didn't hesitate to make a move on her own.

"Of course there's no guarantee that either of us won't change our minds forever, but we can't know how it'll turn out until we've experienced 'forever.' So I think spending that time with someone I love is the happier option."

"Well, if you're that confident, more power to you. I like him, too. What would be good to go with the tea..."

Their conversation came to a pause there. I looked Mr. Homura in the eye. For some reason, his face looked as red as a boiled octopus as he stood behind young master Richard. When he noticed my gaze, he snapped out of his daze, spun around, and walked out the gate. Was that really the best idea? Didn't he have plans here tonight?

"I'm, uh, just going to take a little walk around the block... I'll tell Mika I'm going to be five minutes late."

"I think that's an excellent idea."

Richard smiled politely, and we followed Mr. Homura out of the yard. We watched Chieko head to the station from the opposite end of the alley. A strange feeling of camaraderie had developed between us.

"Hey, Seigi."

"Y-yes?!"

I stood up as straight as I could. Mr. Homura turned to look back at me over his shoulder and gave me a thumbs-up.

"I wish you all the happiness in life."

It almost sounded like a line from a movie. And then Mr. Homura set out on

his “walk,” looking a little unsteady on his feet. Was he okay? And what was that line about wishing me happiness about?

“...Hey, Richard, is Mr. Homura acting a little weird to you?”

“I’m sure he’s fine. He doesn’t appear to be inebriated. Perhaps, while he’s learned to love others, he’s never been very accustomed to being on the receiving end of such affection.”

“What are you talking about? Something’s obviously wrong with him. I’m being serious...”

“Well, I have a question for you. Are *you* all right? What happened to your remorse for negatively interfering with Mr. Homura’s love life?”

“Uuh...”

“I thought so. The parking lot is the other way,” he said, and I followed.

One week later, a wedding invitation arrived at Jewelry Étranger.

I’d never been invited to a wedding before—I didn’t have any relatives to speak of, and none of my friends were old enough to be getting married yet. The event was held in a luxurious Tokyo hotel, and it was full of surprises. There were flowers everywhere I looked, and even the meal service felt like its own little performance. It reminded me of a theme park.

I felt slightly bad, though. I’d checked the market price for the gift I’d wrapped and brought along with me, but its value would hardly cover the food I ate, and it would only be a drop in the bucket compared to the cost of the event. The stars of the evening seemed a bit nervous, but they exchanged glances and smiles every so often.

We’d been invited by the groom, so we were seated on the outskirts of the work-colleagues section full of people from Homura Trading. Richard stuck out like a sore thumb in his formal attire. The women on the bride’s side must have thought he was a wedding model or something, because they kept asking him for photos, but he politely turned them down with his dazzling smile. Being that beautiful must be a little scary.

After the ceremony ended without issue and the reception came to a close, the new couple and their parents waited at the door to greet their guests on the way out. For some reason, Mr. Homura's father—the CEO of a company in Marunouchi—politely bowed his head to Richard. I strained my ears to listen to what they were saying, and it sounded like Homura Trading had a business relationship with an American financial firm that Jeffrey was involved with. It really was a small world.

Suddenly, Chieko signaled to me with her eyes. I came over and asked her what she needed, and she told me she wanted to speak to Richard once everyone had left. Understood. Richard looked a little annoyed when I told him I had a message for “young master Richard,” but once he learned it was from Chieko, he immediately nodded and ended the conversation he was having.

We killed time for about thirty minutes in the café in the hotel lobby. Richard was enjoying a royal milk tea when Chieko came over, looking very mother-of-the-bride in her black kimono with a gold obi. She was carrying a paper bag.

Richard rose and stood up straight. I followed his lead.

“Thank you so much for coming, Mr. Claremont.”

“Allow me to offer my congratulations once again. Although, I wish you wouldn't call me that...”

“Well, I can't exactly keep calling you ‘young master’ now, can I?” Chieko smiled and held out a paper bag. There was a box inside. Maybe a baumkuchen or something? I was about to take it and thank her when Richard grabbed it instead.

Inside was what looked like a black velvet jewelry box.

“May I?” Richard asked, and Chieko nodded.

He popped open the top, and light spilled forth. I gasped. It was the peridot necklace—or used to be, I think?

Peridot was a gentle green stone. Its color was naturally much softer, and it wasn't as valuable as emerald. I'd seen it many times at *Étranger*. But I'd never seen any peridots this big before.

The necklace was a bouquet, or maybe garland would be a better word. There were five flowers that looked a bit like the daisies children might use to make crowns of flowers in a field. Their petals were adorned with melee diamonds, and their golden stalks were intertwined. In the center of each set of graceful petals was a large, chartreuse gemstone. It almost looked like a bouquet of flowers made with magic to never wilt.

But it was only half of a necklace. There were fasteners on either side of the piece. The rest was probably made of the same stones, creating a ring big enough to fit around someone's neck. Richard had mentioned that Catherine's necklace has the unique ability to be disassembled into smaller parts, but I didn't understand what that meant until I actually saw it.

After Richard gazed at the necklace for a bit, he looked at Chieko with an unconcerned smile on his face.

"It's been so long since I've seen this. It's half of the necklace. Pieces like this are commonly called 'transforming jewelry.'"

"Before I returned to Japan, Lady Catherine came to the lab and gave it to me. She left half of it with me, saying that if she held on to it, she'd eventually be found out. I haven't even known where she lived for the last nineteen years. I'm no better than a thief."

"You are not. You absolutely are not," I cut in.

Chieko gave me a confused look, but I hoped she would forgive me. Stealing was my grandmother's field of expertise, so I felt compelled to say something. I knew better than anyone that what she'd done wasn't stealing. But what else could I even say now? *Wait, I know.*

"Um, I did end up reading a little more of *Les Misérables* after we met. Just like how Jean Valjean wasn't a thief, you aren't either, Chieko."

"I encouraged him to read the book because a certain someone recommended it to me once."

"Oh, goodness."

Chieko smiled at Richard. I thought so.

“You’ve made a wonderful friend, young master. Please, take this.”

Richard looked her in the eye for a moment before snapping the lid of the jewelry box closed and handing it back to Chieko.

“I have two mothers. And this is a precious gift one of my mothers gave to the other. I think Catherine would be more pleased if you held on to it than if I did.”

“...Is she doing well?”

“She is, as I understand it, living a life of leisure in the south of France, but she still has hardly any female friends. I would be happy to give you her address, so please send her a letter if you feel inclined. She isn’t much of a fan of email.”

“Of course I will. But—”

“Also, regarding this piece of jewelry—did you know that the five flowers can be removed and worn as a brooch?”

Chieko was surprised. Richard offered her a seat in the lobby and opened the jewelry box again in his lap. He pinched one of the beautiful, bejeweled flowers and gave it a gentle twist. It came away from the rest of the necklace.

Richard flashed a joyful smile when he heard Chieko say her signature: “Oh goodness.”

“Peridot is said to bring good fortune to marriages, so it’s a common wedding gift. The stone is supposed to bring harmony to those who own it—would you say that has held true for you? Perhaps you might take the opportunity to have it remade into a gift for your daughter.”

“Remade? How could I possibly deign to alter something so beautiful?”

“Then what about having some additional parts made for it? I know a very talented artisan. Wearing the whole thing might be a bit too garish, but a single flower could work in even a casual ensemble.”

“You really did grow up to be a wonderful man.”

“And you deserve all the credit for that.”

Richard smiled at her, and I excused myself. I didn’t want to intrude on their moment. There was a big Japanese garden just outside the hotel’s glass

windows. Watching the two of them bathed in the afternoon light with that as their backdrop filled the space with joy.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting, Seigi—what is that?”

“Mr. Homura gave it to me. Um, do you think we could just drop it off at Étranger like this? Do you have the key on you today?”

“Why wouldn’t I have the key? More importantly, were you really planning on dumping it at the shop? Why did you accept something you had no means to care for?”

“I couldn’t say no when he said it would just be thrown away otherwise. He said it should be fine for a while, since it’s in florist’s foam and has a thing of fertilizer.”

“Deplorable. Let’s get going.”

“Thanks.” I nodded mournfully and followed Richard.

We had come to the wedding in Richard’s Jaguar. After the hotel staffer who took the key from the dazzlingly beautiful man bowed and left, he looked at me, seeming shocked. I knew the feeling. If I had to compare myself to something in that moment, I’d probably go with either a peacock or someone who’d come out during the finale of a show.

I’d ended up with this monstrosity because there were still flower arrangements left over from the reception, but the other guests had already taken the smaller, easier-to-carry arrangements. Mr. Homura came over to me with a big smile on his face, saying he’d been looking for me, and forced this massive, round arrangement of white and pale green flowers into my hands. The cut flowers were arranged in a green sponge thing called florist’s foam. I didn’t know how it was put together, but it had five flower buds dangling down like a long tail. I took it, assuming it would be easy to disassemble, but it was all held together with sturdy wire that my bare hands were no match for. I had been holding it in front of my chest while I was waiting for Richard, but I was worried passersby might think I was doing some kind of fundraising thing or something, so I decided to carry it behind my back, transforming me into a rare

example of the Nakata Peacock.

When the hotel valet pulled the Jaguar around, I stuffed the flowers inside and made sure they weren't obstructing the rearview mirror before I sat down in the passenger seat. I wasn't used to wearing a suit, so I felt stiff. But I'd have to get used to it for my job search.

"...Um, so."

"What? I'm heading to Ginza. Or do you need to use the restroom?"

"No, not that."

I opened with another *um* before finally broaching the topic. I told him that I was in my third year of college now, and my job search was starting to really wind up. Company information sessions were usually on the weekend, so I would probably have to take more days off in the coming days—no, not probably, I definitely would have to. I wanted to keep helping out at the store as much as I could, but there were so many unknowns on my end, so I suggested that he might want to find another part-timer to take my place. Richard kept his eyes on the road and said, "I see."

And that was it.

What was I supposed to do with that? If he'd said, "All right, I'll look for new staff," I could discuss new shifts with him. Or if he asked me to come in by any means necessary, I could get the days I definitely wouldn't be able to do figured out sooner rather than later. But "I see" gave me nothing to work with. Was he just dodging the question? I'd had to work up a lot of courage to even bring it up, too.

"I'm worried that it might end up causing trouble at the shop."

"If you know that, I wish you wouldn't accept gifts that you know are going to be troublesome."

"I'm not talking about the flowers!"

That was twice in a row. It had to be deliberate. What was going on with him? Was he just so happy to be reunited with Chieko that he wasn't particularly concerned with his part-timer at the moment? I was a little angry, but I didn't

want to ruin his evening. I'd just bring it up at Étranger next week. This wasn't really the appropriate time to be bringing up work talk anyway.

I went quiet, and Richard glanced over at me before he smiled a bit.

"You're worried about causing trouble at the shop? You know that's not true. What you're really worried about is that unbeknownst to you, I might hire someone else part-time, and before you knew it, you might not belong at Étranger anymore. Am I right? That's why you're so preoccupied with my opinions."

He just laid it all out there. I was at a complete loss for words. I mumbled that he was right, and my beautiful boss smiled, a little astonished.

"Don't you worry, I promise I won't do anything of the sort without consulting you first."

It felt like he'd smacked me on the back. And, I mean, something literally had—the peacock-tail-like bits of the arrangement had flown backward and given me a pat on the back. I shoved it all back into its place. I was grateful for the interruption though; it gave me time to hide my embarrassment.

"...I'm glad to hear that, but are you sure it's not going to inconvenience you?"

"If, for example, you were to disappear without saying a word about it, only 'Hold your head up high, even if others deceive you,' I guess I would be a little inconvenienced. But I don't think anything short of that would be of particular concern."

"That's not funny... Look, I'm not worried about it now. Everything will work out in the end."

"If you ask me, you should be more worried about it. Why do I need to tell you all this?"

I guess he had a point. It's not like inconveniences can be canceled out by adding and subtracting them. The same way you can't cheat sleep deprivation just by sleeping in extra one day. When things happen, there's always going to be someone causing an inconvenience and someone who has to deal with that inconvenience—it's not the sort of thing where you can just go "Well, I toughed

it out last time, so it's my turn this time." I mean, I hate the idea of having to call Richard week after week to tell him "Sorry I can't make it this week." Wait, now that I think about it, maybe I just wanted to avoid having to do that.

"...It'd be nice if I could keep coming to Étranger every week while I'm on my job search."

"At any rate, it's still a ways off. More pressingly, you said you wanted help with your self-assessment, didn't you? I'll keep it brief. You are a rather chaotic type of person who is easily swept away by the heat of the moment, and your frequent tendency toward rash behavior has put you in many a trying dilemma, which you typically forget once the crisis has passed, hampering your ability to reflect on your actions. Have you considered becoming a Hollywood stuntman?"

"Y-you know, if anyone else but you had said that to me, I don't know if I'd ever be able to recover, so please go easy on me. Please, I'm begging you."

"But if it comes from me you *can* recover? Then I shall shoulder the responsibility of being brutally honest with you."

"Ughhh..."

But, Richard continued, shifting to English, your ambition is awe-inspiring.

He explained that while I didn't harbor outsized expectations for myself, I also never undersold my potential either. And that people often found themselves feeling empty and underwhelmed whenever they took stock of their accomplishments, when in reality, they contained multitudes and had plenty of room for more.

"...Man, you're embarrassing me. Thanks, though."

"You're quite welcome. By the way, did you notice that I was speaking English just now?"

"Huh?"

"Were you waiting for me to call you on it?" I replied in English.

"Not really," Richard shot back in blunt Japanese.

I get it, he was trying to encourage me by demonstrating that I could actually

have a conversation in English. But the only person I'd spoken to in English so far was Richard, so I was concerned that I might be speaking some kind of weird dialect or something. The thought of a college student who wasn't particularly fluent in English suddenly speaking Richard-style English—if such a thing even exists—at the very least, I could tell that it was different from the English this one customer from Spain spoke and also Saul's Indian-accented English—was utterly terrifying. Surely people would laugh at me.

“You know, I have been trying to teach you ‘standard’ English, as you might call it, but if someone ever asks you why you speak Oxbridge dialect, just tell them that it's because you have a deep admiration for Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. She also struggled with her speech.”

I wasn't used to hearing the British prime minister referenced by her full name like that. When I commented to Richard that Margaret was a lovely name, he laughed a little and said that “an iron flower is still a flower nonetheless.” That's right—Thatcher was called “The Iron Lady.” I'd read about that in a book.

The flowers we saw earlier were made of stone and metal, but they were very beautiful.

“Flowers that can survive a lot of punishment are so powerful—they're beautiful and robust.”

“That may be true, but that necklace isn't as robust as you might think. Peridot is only a 6.5 on the Mohs scale—on the soft side for a gemstone. It can be enjoyed in beautiful faceted cuts like that when set in a necklace, but the much more durable cabochon cut is greatly preferred for use in rings and bracelets—items much more likely to be banged around.”

“But all the stones in Chieko's necklace were flawless.”

“Because she took very good care of them. Not to mention, she did say that she had never once actually worn it? I'm sure Catherine would be appalled if she heard. It's tragic, really. I'm sure she gave it to Chieko as a memento, too.”

“I mean, that sounds like a pretty...questionable financial decision, doesn't it? Weren't her relatives hurting for cash?”

“Catherine would never even consider giving something so precious to someone she didn’t care for.”

I felt like sighing every time I thought about that necklace. I guess people really did give their loved ones jewelry for all sorts of occasions. Maybe the more beautiful the piece was, the stronger the emotions behind it. Of course, whether that was a good or a bad thing was another issue entirely.

That necklace didn’t bring “good fortune” to Richard’s parents in their marriage—that much was obvious. But I knew all too well that separation could be a blessing, too.

I was sure that the most beautiful man in the world, who was right here next to me, knew that very well, too.

“You’re doing it again. It’s not polite to stare at people’s faces like that.”

“Sorry.”

“...Though I must admit, when it’s someone I know doing the staring, perhaps it’s not all bad. Funny thing, that.” Richard smiled, his eyes still on the road.

That was probably his way of saying that he didn’t mind if I stared at him. I still found myself wondering if it was really okay even after hearing something as nice as that though.

I didn’t say a word, and Richard just laughed, like he could see right through me.

“Carry yourself with pride, Seigi Nakata. Unfounded self-doubt is just as bothersome as unfounded self-confidence. And if nothing else, you have at least one person who believes in your success right here.”

“I-Is that founded on anything...?”

“Of course it is.”

I wanted to hear what it was, desperately. I had a feeling that would be a useful jewel in my self-assessment. I beg of you, Lord Richard, Emperor of Sweets.

The car came to a stop at a light. After a solemn moment of silence, Richard looked at me and smiled with delight.

“That’s a secret you’ll just have to uncover for yourself.”

His lips were pulled into an exquisite curve. I couldn’t help but feel my eyes crinkle when he looked at me like that.

I wondered if I’d ever get to talk to Chieko again. We could probably form a club for victims of Richard Claremont de Vulpian and his mother’s beauty. That said, I’m pretty sure all our conversations would just go, “They sure are pretty,” and “They are, aren’t they?” so it would probably be closer to a fan club than anything. That’d be a little embarrassing—but maybe we could form it in secret.

“Seigi?”

“...I’m gonna work my butt off.”

I told him that I was going to put my all into studying for the civil service exam and looking for a job in the private sector and make it work somehow—all so I could treat my boss at my part-time job to a nice meal. No, wait, I should probably treat Hiromi first and then take Richard to Shiseido Parlor.

My beautiful boss smiled bashfully and glanced over at me.

“I’ll keep my expectations in check.”

When we arrived in Ginza, I dragged the flower arrangement out of the car, and we headed to the shop from the parking lot. We ran into the old man who runs the sushi shop next door on the way and said hello to him. I’d eaten at his shop once with Saul when we were watching the store together. Everything there was delicious.

“Good afternoon.”

“Same to you! Those are some incredible flowers. What’s the occasion?”

“We just got back from the wedding.”

“Oh, the two of you? Congratulations.”

“Thank you!”

Something seemed a little off, but I didn’t have time to worry about it. I waited and waited in front of Étranger, but my boss never came. I went back

down the stairs to check and saw Richard with a frustrated look on his face trying to explain something to the sushi shop owner. I waved to him to let him know I was waiting, and he waved back with hollow eyes. He looked extremely worn out when he finally came up the stairs.

“Are you okay? Did something happen?”

“...Do you have any plans after this?”

“Nope. Oh, wanna get something sweet to eat?”

“Yes, I would love to.”

Richard smiled at me like Saul usually did. It was kind of terrifying. Something must have happened, but he never answered the question. I slipped into *Étranger* and hurriedly found a spot for the arrangement on the bookshelf. It looked pretty nice.

“That’ll work. Let’s go—Richard? What’s wrong?”

“I’ve been thinking lately that our English conversations have been excessively mild and bland. So let’s have a talk, Mr. Seigi Nakata. I’ll help you with your self-assessment—I won’t be pulling any punches.”

His voice dropped to almost a growl for that last part. Richard had a smile on his face as he snapped the door closed and locked it again. He was probably about to give me one of his lectures—it had been a while.

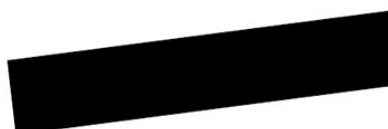
I bowed my head, saying I would humbly listen to every word, and Richard started walking back to the car.

I was grateful I’d been granted a little more time to spend in this place where I felt at home.

c a s e

EXTRA

Andalusite on
Christmas Eve



“ARE WE A JEWELRY STORE or a big-box store? I can’t even tell anymore.”

Saul dodged my idle chitchat and promptly left the room. He seemed very busy today. But, I mean, of course he was, *Étranger* was getting a flood of customers, and the fridge was stuffed full of milk.

It was Christmas Eve, the one day of the year when people were equally happy to open their hearts and their wallets. We’d had so many customers picking up and placing orders for jewelry that you could almost forget that the shop owner had been absent since the fall. So many of our customers were worried when the shop temporarily closed—it really made me realize how much care the beautiful jeweler had put into earning their trust.

Richard had been very thorough about turning over the running of the shop. Even if he had never returned, Saul would be able to safely deliver the jewelry to his customers’ hands—but ultimately, they had ordered those pieces because they wanted to buy them *from Richard*. So they were happy to have Richard back, just like I was.

“Richard, we got another care package. Judging from the box, it’s probably a fruit cake or jelly.”

“Just eat it whenever. I’ve had my fill of that sort of thing for quite a while.”

“Wow, that doesn’t sound like something the Emperor of Sweets would say.”

“Do you have any idea what I’ve eaten since this morning?”

“Well, um...cake, cake, and more cake...”

His customers, men and women alike, would show up with sweet Christmas presents, glad to see Richard again and offering to join him in enjoying the treat. Short cakes, Mont Blancs, fruit rolls, opera cakes, ganache cakes, every kind of cheesecake you can imagine, liqueur-soaked savarins, freshly baked tarts, gooey puddings, meringues decorated like Santa Claus, and more. Coffee jelly seemed like a moment of divine salvation, but it was 90 percent sugar.

It was common knowledge among *Étranger*’s regulars that Richard loved sweet things. It would be kind of hard *not* to notice that, considering one of the unique things about the shop was that the owner sat down to eat cake with his

customers.

That said, even His Majesty the Emperor had his limits.

It was around 1 p.m. Though I knew we didn't really have time for that sort of thing, I still suggested running out to grab some yakitori or fried chicken or something. My beautiful boss chuckled vacantly and replied with a smile that I should go ahead and do that. His eyes weren't smiling, though. He looked ill. I was sure if he consumed any more sugar, it'd cause serious mental and physical health problems.

Just as I was about to set off at a sprint to pick up a skewer or two or three from a yakitori shop, Richard seemed to remember something. He suddenly stood from his lounge chair, walked briskly into the back room, and then returned with a small box. He stood straight, sat silently back down, and popped open the lid.

There was a strange stone inside the white case with rounded corners. The beautiful jeweler's pale fingers gently took the stone out of its case and snapped some photos of it with his phone. I had to wonder why. I mean, there was better lighting in the lounge than in the back room, so it was the best room in the store for photos, but I'd never seen Richard do anything like that before.

"What's up? What are you doing?"

He didn't respond, but not because he was feeling despondent. It seemed okay to get closer. I wanted to get a better look at the stone.

At first, I thought the stone Richard was holding was a garnet because of its orange-ish color. But I could tell right away that it wasn't. Just a small change in angle made the round faceted stone flash a deep red, a fresh green like peridot, a dull gold, and all sorts of other colors. It seemed different from iolite and alexandrite's color change properties. What was it? Richard only needed one look at my face to know what I was wondering.

"Andalusite. It's a rare stone found in Spain's Andalusia region and in Brazil. Because it's produced in such small quantities, it's rarely treated like a regular gemstone, but it is prized by its fans for its color-changing properties. This stone has been faceted, but it looks almost like a mosaic of various colors, doesn't it? The cutter really put their skills to the test to make sure that every color was

well displayed.”

“That’s really cool! It’s like stained glass.”

“That’s a very good comparison. Its shifting colors certainly make it reminiscent of opal or alexandrite, although in the case of andalusite, its colors are visible all at once.”

Andalusite. Named for the region of Andalusia. I was sure the reason its ability to change colors was different from opal and alexandrite had something to do with the stone’s chemical makeup or how it formed. If I asked him about it, it’d probably turn into a chemistry lecture, so I decided to hold off.

“I always feel like I’ve seen just about every gemstone in the world, but I guess there are still a lot of stones I don’t know about, huh?”

“Your arrogance is adorable. If I started listing every stone you don’t even know the name of, we’d be here long after the sun went down.”

This afternoon, Mr. Sugiura, a rare stone collector, was set to come by. Collecting was his hobby, from what I understood. He was a single man in his seventies, but he was full of energy and looked at rare stones almost like they were his own children. I was sure he’d be pleased by this one. I said as much to Richard rather than asking about the mysterious photo session, and Richard looked a little sad.

“Huh? What’s wrong?”

“...I really would have liked to have given you the day off.”

“Where’s this coming from? Why?”

“I’ve heard that Christmas is an important event in the romantic calendar for the youth in Japan.”

Oh. That. I was happy he brought it up, and that he was concerned about me.

I wasn’t fretting pointlessly over what Tanimoto was doing this evening, because I knew she was going to a Christmas party. I made sure to ask her before our winter break. She was going with her fellow teachers-in-training to an orphanage to help throw a party for the children there. She seemed really busy when she smiled and told me that all the children there were such hard

workers that she wanted to help them out, too, but she sparkled brighter than a real angel. And then she gave me a *haramaki* with a pocket for a disposable hand warmer, saying it was cold out and she didn't want me getting sick. It was hand-knitted. I was so, so happy I could have started crying and dancing at the same time.

My spirits drooped a bit when I found out that Tanimoto hadn't knit it herself—it was a test piece her mother had made for the orphanage—but that was a minor detail. The fact that she had given me something to keep me warm made me eternally happy. I returned the favor by giving her some cozy slippers to keep her feet warm, and she thanked me with a smile. I was so happy I just about melted, but a few days later she sent me the message “She loves them!” with a photo—of her mother wearing the slippers.

There really are no gods in this world, huh? Anyway, at least my stomach's been warm lately.

I mumbled something about it to him, and the beautiful jeweler stared off into space.

“She's spending Christmas a bit like we do in England.”

“Really?”

“While the specific character of the holiday varies depending on the location, throughout Europe, the religious element of Christmas is still very strong. Drives to provide warm food and beds for the homeless are very common, along with soliciting Christmas donations and volunteering at soup kitchens and whatnot. Perhaps you could say that it is the day when those in the Christian world are inspired with a sudden desire to give back to society without reservation.”

“I know about the soup kitchen thing, but in Japan, it's really just a shopping day.”

“It's a fascinating cultural difference, isn't it?”

There was no irony in Richard's tone. That was just how the jeweler viewed the world—to each their own. I liked his way of looking at things.

The beautiful jeweler caressed the beautiful stone once again.

He seemed kind of melancholic. The mess in England wasn't all that long ago. He said he had wrapped various things up before returning to Ginza, but he was likely worn out from it all. He probably should have been less worried about letting me have time off and more concerned about taking some time off himself.

"I know it wouldn't be good for business, but isn't it rough having to work today?"

Richard's expression shifted a little, and he turned the question back on me. Me?

"I'm fine. If anything, I'm grateful for it."

"Grateful?"

"Oh..."

How to explain...

This isn't limited to Christmas, but nothing good ever comes from spending festive seasons like it with nothing in particular to do. It's actually more depressing if you're not busy on days when you see how everyone else around you is super happy and fulfilled. I always found it easier to keep myself busy by contributing to society in some way whenever Christmas or similar holidays rolled around. Hiromi was the same way. When I think about past Christmases, I mostly remember how weirdly uncomfortable things were at home because Hiromi was worried about getting home early. And it just made it worse that she never complained about how busy or tired she was, even though it was obvious that stress from work was piling up. But she stopped doing that when I started school. It was actually a relief when she went back to her regular night shifts instead.

"It's just that days like this make me dwell on things I probably shouldn't. It's better if I'm busy."

"...It is a difficult time of year for outsiders, isn't it?"

Outsiders. Étranger. Richard had apparently given the shop its name because he felt he didn't belong anywhere. Probably the same way I'd felt during Christmas as a little kid. This might be a weird thing to say, but he was almost a

professional in the field of a particular kind of loneliness. He was intimately familiar with the feeling that I'd compare to a dark alleyway off to the side of a brilliant neon-lit main street. I found a great deal of solace in places like that.

Richard let out another short sigh. He picked up his phone from the table with what looked like a great deal of resolve and typed something with his long fingers. He sent someone a text. I was pretty sure he'd attached some of those photos he'd just taken of the andalusite. I wondered why. I cocked my head to the side quizzically, and Richard shrugged.

"We have some of this gem at my 'home.' Henry was always quite fond of it. He liked its many colors and said that its hues reminded him of Mozart."

"Was that text you just sent—"

"Just a little holiday greeting."

Richard explained that he had gotten a Merry Christmas text from his cousin in England. He said that he thought about what to say for half a day but ultimately decided to send him a photo of the stone for now.

I knew things were complicated with Richard's family. There may have been no other options, but Richard effectively had to surrender to settle things, and even though the issue had been resolved now, he probably still had some lingering resentment over the whole thing. And given that, I was pretty sure Henry wasn't the type to incessantly—or ever really—pester Richard over text. He probably had to muster up some courage to send Richard a Christmas greeting, so the ever dutiful jeweler understandably felt obligated to respond. If he were the type to just ignore it because it was too annoying to deal with, he'd definitely be ignoring me, too. Also, when Henry shook my hand, it was just skin and bones. If one of your family members ended up like that, I think it would only be human to hope they get better soon whether you liked them or not.

Dealing with people really is annoying.

Instead of saying anything, I headed back into the kitchen and made him another royal milk tea. I had a feeling he'd be in sugar hell today, so I held back on the sugar in the tea today. I offered it to him without saying a word, and he accepted it without saying anything either. The shop was so quiet. If you went outside to Ginza's Chuo-doori, you'd find yourself in a vast pedestrian mall

adorned with gorgeous golden trees and white and silver neon reindeer ornaments, but if you went just one street over, everything was the same as usual.

Neither of us said anything for a while. It was strange. I felt like my awareness of my own body had expanded, until I was the shop and the shop was me. The heat wasn't cranked up too high but was warm and comfortable. The andalusite sparkled in its little box. The gentle glow of the stone made me realize how familiar the feeling was.

"Talking about stained glass reminded me. You know, I really like churches during the week. I'm a Buddhist, but they always put me at ease for some reason, and no one ever gets mad at me for just being there."

"You probably would have been a devout Christian had you been born in Europe. You seem like the type to dive headfirst into charity with the guidance of a greater power."

"I think I'd be more likely to believe you if you said I'd probably have become a sumo wrestler."

As I was laughing it off, I suddenly realized that Richard was also looking at me with concern.

"Um, do you mind if I tell you something a little weird?"

"It depends on what kind of weird. Keep it short."

"Thanks."

I told him that I felt like of all the Christmases I'd experienced so far, today was definitely the most comfortable.

It wasn't something I'd ever expected to feel really. And I could never say that to Hiromi. I knew how hard she worked to make me comfortable. That would just make me sound ungrateful for everything she did for me. Richard let out a sigh.

"Not everything has to be about work, you know."

"I'm not saying I'm happy because I'm getting paid for the day. How should I put it..."

I could explain it in my head. Christmas was a special day. But special days when everyone is having fun and celebrating can be a little rough, too. So I was happy to be able to spend it in such calm and quiet. But I felt a little too embarrassed to actually say that. The most beautiful man in the world who had an aura about him like a quiet moonlight night, seemed to smile a bit.

“Now, I’m just speaking for myself, but special days can be a bit like storms. And in stormy weather, what you need isn’t a compass or sails but a calm harbor where you can set anchor.”

And then Richard said softly that he prayed that I would find such a place.

I appreciated the sentiment, but it was kind of lonesome. Being in this shop made normal, boring days into special ones, and let me spend special holidays as if they were any other day. Maybe a shop where a beautiful English man regularly served cake and presented gemstones really was the ultimate alternate dimension compared to everyday life. I think even Santa would lose track of time if he happened to drop in. Whether it was Christmas or New Year’s, as long as I was at *Étranger*, they all became “*Étranger Day*” instead. It seemed almost like a strange contest of strength.

“I don’t know if it’s a harbor exactly, but I don’t think you need to worry about me as long as you keep letting me work here. I think this place has even more power than a church. Well, no, clearly the power is coming not from the place but you, so...”

“I haven’t the faintest idea as to what you’re talking about. I thought you were here to work.”

“Well, that’s part of it. You know, you could just praise me for being such a hard worker. I’m working hard while my soul is being healed. It lets me think about all sorts of things.”

If the color of andalusite was like stained glass, then what *Étranger* gave to me was a mosaic of emotions. I think I enjoyed collecting all the various emotions that came through the store with its varied customers.

And I enjoyed it because Richard was here.

“Look, all I’m saying is it would make me really happy if you would tell me if

something nice happens to you. I'll gather so many delicious and beautiful things to celebrate with that even you won't know what to do. I want to repay you for everything you do for me daily."

"...And I'm sure you would put your incredible vocabulary to use to sing my praises for doing what I do every day, too. You've already said enough to make me break out in hives."

"You really do know me! But, hives? Are you sure you don't have some kind of allergy?"

"I do not," Richard said.

He looked at me for a moment before seemingly trying to see just how much air he could inhale at once and letting it out again. He took a deep breath? Why?

"...Perhaps it was for the best that I did not say it."

"Huh? Say what?"

"Nothing."

"Aw, come on, tell me."

His only reply was an unfriendly voice demanding more tea. It didn't seem like I had any shot of getting anywhere with that line of questioning. Got it.

"If you don't get your spirits up, I'm sure we're just going to end up with even more sweets to deal with—oh, I know! What if I make some of Saul's spiced tea instead of just royal milk tea? We have some left."

"I will politely decline that offer."

He rejected the idea flat out in a hundredth of a second. Really?

"It might be nice to try something different once in a while."

"That tea is like Saul's own brand of herbal medicine. Perhaps because it is a Sri Lankan Ayurvedic health remedy, drinking too much seems to make excessive sugar intake physically uncomfortable."

"That makes it sound like a super healthy tea, though."

"If you want to drink it so badly, drink it yourself."

“I’m not that crazy about it.”

“I don’t wanna.”

“You’re acting like a spoiled brat.”

“I’m your boss, actually. And your boss wants you to make him some royal milk tea.”

“Yeah, all right.”

While I was making another batch of low-sugar tea, customers came into the shop. A couple had been walking around Ginza and just happened to drop in to check out the shop. They must have had keen eyes, because they couldn’t have picked a better shop to stop by on Christmas. The shop owner’s silver tongue and the delicious treats would make it a day that would be hard to forget.

I prepared three servings of tea and came out of the kitchen.

c a s e

EXTRA

Tiger's Eye
Look Back



WHY IS IT THAT eyes in particular are said to ward off evil?

A man came into the shop with a bracelet made of tiger's eye—a semiprecious stone—on a glorious Sunday in May. He wore what looked like a rosary, along with his expensive wristwatch. When I asked him what it was, he said the stone was called tiger's eye.

He bought a tiepin featuring a red stone called rubellite. At the end of his appointment, as I was seeing him out, I made a clumsy attempt at being a salesman—mentioning that our shop deals in all sorts of things and we could stock bracelets, too. The man just smiled, then said something kind of interesting.

He said that he wasn't wearing the bracelet because he was particularly fond of bracelets. The tiger's eye was a third eye—so it made a good talisman, he explained. A third eye was a pretty useful thing for a businessman—which was why he wore the stone on his wrist. He wasn't interested in bracelets made of gold or diamonds.

Having said all that, he waved goodbye to me.

He worked for a company in Osaka. He was a buyer for international goods. He honestly seemed less interested in the tiepin, and more like he wanted to star in a drama about shopping at a mysterious store in Ginza.

I didn't get a chance to ask him what kind of talisman it was, exactly.

"Hey, Richard, do you think the third eye and the talisman thing is about, like, having a discerning eye for stuff? Like, you know, so you don't end up picking up anything weird kind of a thing?"

My beautiful boss was enjoying his royal milk tea as I explained the conversation I'd just had with the customer in detail. He looked blankly at me, blinked a few times, and then silently returned his gaze to his tea.

He seemed to be enjoying his cup, and as a novice tea server, nothing could make me happier. But I wasn't so sure about his reaction just then. If I were to caption the look he was giving me, I didn't know if I'd pick "You idiot," or "You absolute moron."

“...Seigi, how much do you know about tiger’s eye?”

“Huh?”

Well, um, I know it’s brownish and that it’s called tiger’s eye, and...that’s about it. I mean, this was the first time I’d ever seen it.

My beautiful boss continued in elegant Japanese as he saw me standing there struggling to find the words.

The stone was called “tiger’s eye.” Its Japanese name was *torameishi*—literally tiger’s eye stone. Calling it a brownish stone wasn’t a very accurate description. It had stripes of both dark, almost black, brown, and golden brown. The stone got its name from the line of light that ran through it like a cat’s eye, but the effect came from parallel asbestos fibers that had infiltrated the quartz. Wait, asbestos?

I asked Richard if that was the same asbestos you hear about being dangerous and stuff, and he calmly nodded, adding that it was highly unlikely to pose a health hazard like you hear about in the news these days in this form. He really did know everything. It struck me that it felt a bit odd for this blond-haired, blue-eyed man to be so aware of current issues in Japan, but I guess it was probably useful in this line of work as well.

“I had no idea. I wonder if our last customer knew all that, too.”

“Whether or not he has an interest in its mineralogical properties, I think he was much better informed on the properties of tiger’s eye than you are. I believe he said it was *another* eye, not a *discerning* eye, didn’t he? While having a good eye for things is certainly a useful ability for anyone doing business, I’m not sure it’s the sort of skill a bracelet could compensate for.”

“So, it’s not like a talisman for good judgment then?”

“No. Seigi...can you understand this, at least?”

He then spoke to me in English. I had gotten so used to the fact that this blond-haired, blue-eyed man spoke Japanese 99 percent of the time that it actually made me think, *Wow, he can speak a foreign language.* Obviously, it should have been the other way around.

“...‘He has eyes in the back of his head?’”

“Bravo. Your listening comprehension is strong.”

“Oh, it really isn’t. You obviously spoke in a way to make it easy for me to understand.”

Well, regardless, I seemed to have passed the listening test. It sounded like an idiom. I’d gotten decent scores on the English section of my college entrance exams... Eyes in the back of your head. It probably meant...

“Is it like to have a shrewd eye? Oh, wait, is that like a third eye?”

Richard softly applauded, praising my deduction. I guess I was right. I see, I see. I guess that made sense. I could sense a hint of dismay in his eyes, as if to say, “You couldn’t figure that out on your own?” But he was still as handsome as ever, regardless.

“It seems you finally figured it out. What he needs is a shrewd eye, or to put it another way, the ability to remain clearheaded under stress or to be able to view oneself objectively. Humans have but two eyes, limiting what they can see at once. There isn’t a single person on this earth who can look behind their own head. But when faced with a decisive moment, if you don’t have an objective view of your position, someone may pull the rug out from under your feet. At times like those, what could be more useful than a view from behind?” the beautiful jeweler said.

So it was less like having telepathy or something and more like taking a deep breath and taking a beat to think. Richard nodded enthusiastically before I could even ask. I guess I was right about that, too.

“I wonder how important that is in his line of work.”

“I believe it’s an important skill for everyone, *Seigi*.”

“Are you trying to imply something?”

“Are you sure you’re not reading too much into it?”

The beautiful jeweler said my name again, playing dumb. Honestly, I still wasn’t used to hearing my name in that voice of his—but I couldn’t say I disliked it, either. Maybe it was partly because I got a little fed up with being

called “guard” all the time at my last job at the TV station, but it was also nice to know that the person I was talking to saw me for who I was.

“Yes, what is it, boss?”

“Do you remember what his name was?” Richard asked.

His name? He must have meant the customer with the tiger’s eye bracelet. I’d just been saying “he” this whole time, but Richard was asking me to remember his name. I’m pretty sure it was...

“Mr. Asano?”

“Bravo. You don’t need to develop superpowers, but you do work here. As your boss, it would make me very happy if you tried to keep in mind that you contribute to maintaining a comfortable atmosphere for our customers.”

“Understood,” I bowed my head.

“Good,” Richard said with a smile.

His perfect smile was so beautiful, it made me hold my breath, but I held back. However understanding he may have been, I couldn’t just say everything that came into my mind.

It suddenly hit me that maybe *that’s* what this third eye thing was all about. It was that little voice in the back of your head that goes “Hey, maybe that’s not quite it” when you make up your mind about something. I wasn’t fashionable enough to be able to pull off a tiger’s eye bracelet, but I did feel like trying to act like I was wearing one.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, I guess I was just thinking that the world might be a more peaceful place if everyone went around wearing tiger’s eye bracelets.”

“I’m inclined to agree. But perhaps this is a good illustration of just how hard it can be to view oneself objectively. An unrealized dream shared by all of humanity,” Richard said and smiled softly.

Ahh, he really is beautiful. No, no, no, no. Remember the tiger’s eye. Don’t forget to pause and think before you act.

“Seigi, what’s wrong?”

“I’m fine. It’s nothing. It’s just...look, I swear I’m really trying my best, but please don’t take it the wrong way if I look at you sometimes, okay? You’re just so beautiful...”

I continued making excuses, saying I felt like I was being compelled by an irresistible force, and Richard’s blue eyes flashed a soft color as he set his teacup down and flashed an almost chillingly false smile.

“Very well, I’ll make an effort not to. But I also expect you to make an effort on *your* end. They say that while you’re captivated by beautiful things, your soul might be stolen away,” Richard said. Then his expression shifted. His fake smile suddenly transformed into a blank mask before gradually becoming a bewitching smile. A terrifyingly beautiful face.

I pulled myself together and stood up straight.

“Roger that. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I’m not sure *roger* is appropriate language for the workplace.”

“Understood, sir!”

“...Well, good.”

The ability to reflect on oneself. It definitely seemed like a vital skill if I wanted to keep working at this job that paid way better than the night shift at the TV station. Well, second only to the ability to brew delicious royal milk tea, of course.



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